

THE SPELL OF THE SHANG K'AMBU

AND OTHER STORIES

DENNIS H. STOVALL



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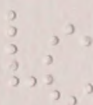
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The Spell of the Shang Kambu

AND OTHER STORIES

By Dennis H. Stovall

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To

MY BOYS

Whose Best Chum

I Want to

Be

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THE SPELL OF THE "SHANG KAMBU"

CHAPTER ONE.

HHEY, Bush!" sang Glen Morton, in cheery salutation, when the two chums met on the street, "I've good news."

"Good news, eh?" Bush Adams answered. "Sure! I know what it is: School begins in exactly ten days from date. Which means more fun wrestling with geometry, square roots, physics, civil government—"

"Break it off! Quit and begin over!" Glen interjected, "or I'll shy a brick at you! School will begin all right—and soon enough to suit me; but that isn't particularly good news. Anyhow, it isn't the news I wanted to tell you."

"Then tell me the good news you wanted to tell me," begged Bush.

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"Major Willard has returned!"

"You don't mean it!" Bush Adams manifested a quick and genuine interest. "When did he get in?"

"Last night's train. I met him early this morning. Said he wanted to meet you and me right away. Has some wonderful discovery he intends to let us in on. Something he picked up in Tibet, or Timbuctoo, or some other of those foreign ports."

"Say, let's go down at once. I've nothing particular in the way just now." Bush took his chum by the arm and started; but it required little urging.

The return home of Major Willard, retired soldier, scientist, traveler, was ever an event of importance in the little Western town; but especially was his homecoming a big event for Bush and Glen. From as far back as they could remember, the two boys had shared the wonders and listened to the marvelous tales of adventure the major had to tell. And they had gazed with wide-open eyes, and often with bated breath, at the strange creatures,

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relics and rich ornaments the traveler gathered from all corners of the globe.

This September morning, when the two chums entered the little, two-room building which set back a distance from the street, and which served as a combined library and laboratory for the traveler-scientist, they found the major sitting at ease in a big chair, his hands idly folded, and his eyes half closed, as if in meditative thought. The boys halted abruptly on the threshold, and started to turn back quietly, not wishing to disturb the thinker.

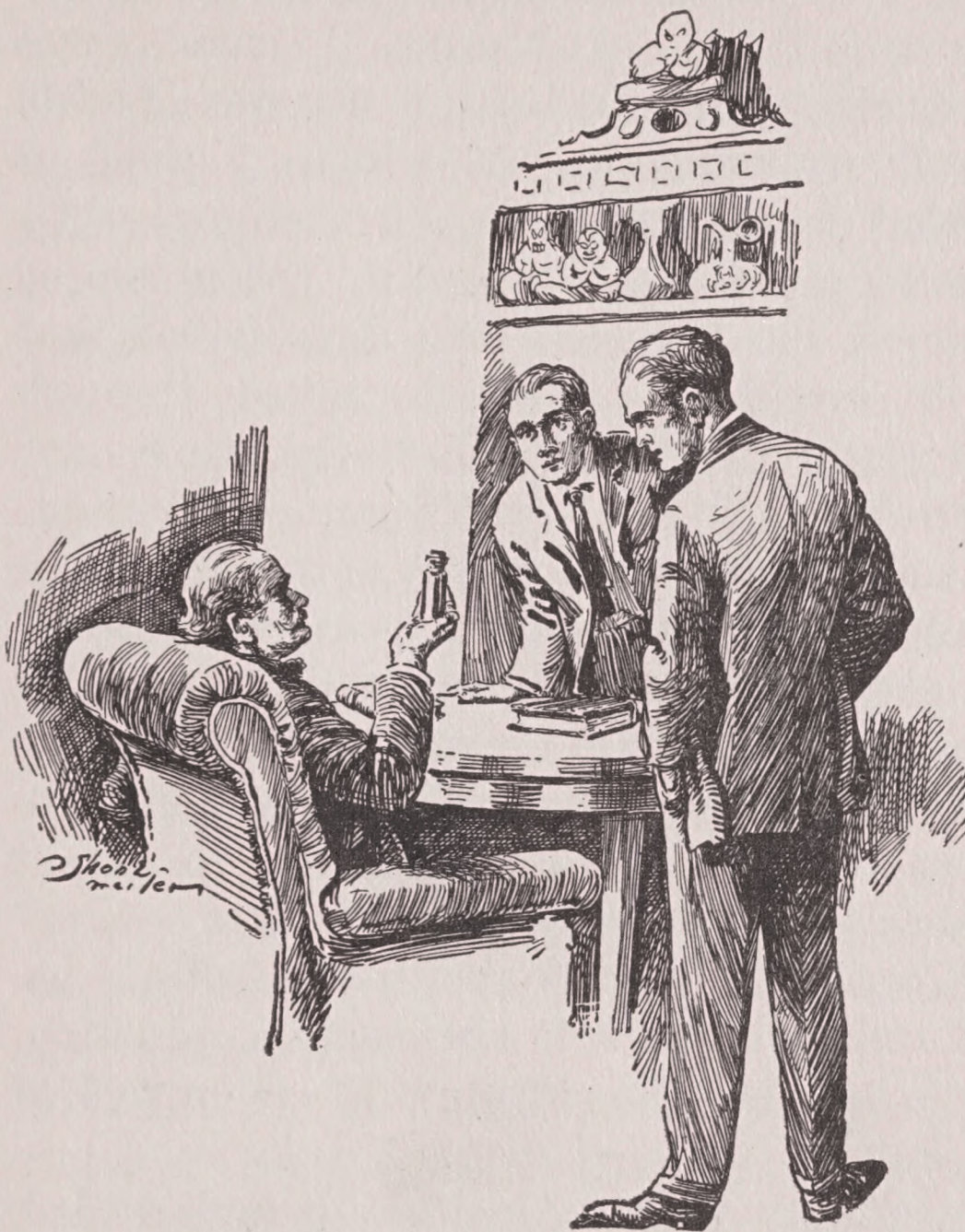
But Major Willard, hearing the footsteps at his door, raised his head and looked around. His deep-lined features brightened in quick recognition. "Come in, my lads—come right in!" he heartily invited. He half rose from his chair, and grasped the hands of the youthful callers in cheerful greeting. "Take seats! Take seats! I have something I want to show you, and tell you about."

Spread on a stand at the major's right hand were a number of sheets of faded

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and much-worn manuscript. Near the manuscript was a vial of green-colored liquid. Sitting down again, the major reached over and gathered up the sheets of manuscript in one hand, and with the other lifted the vial of green-colored liquid. "As you boys know," he explained as a beginning, "I have been away for over two years, and in that time have done considerable traveling, and much research work. On account of the war, and of conditions that grew out of the war, I was not able to go into the Holy Land and make the investigations in Bible topography or Scriptural study that I intended. But I did go to Tibet, and spent a year and longer in Lhasa, the capital. Lhasa is a city of mystery and of hidden wonders in what the world first accepted as the 'black art,' or the evolution of chemistry."

The veteran traveler and scientist leaned back in his easy chair and poised the vial of green-colored liquid before his keen, critical eyes. The two callers listened eagerly for the coming revelation.



The veteran traveler and scientist leaned back in his easy chair and poised the vial of green-colored liquid before his keen, critical eyes

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"While in the close-locked, jealously guarded city of Lhasa, I came upon something, or was led into a series of tests and experiments by which I evolved what I believe to be one of the world's most marvelous mysteries." The major shook the vial, and the boys noted that the liquid it contained passed through a rapid succession of shades, tints and colors. "This mystery has puzzled scientists and chemists for a long time. Possibly I should better say it has puzzled those men who have followed a particular line of study and research."

The boys were getting anxiously uneasy. They wanted the major to get at once into a revelation of the "mystery." What they desired was more definite information, and less abstract introduction. "What is this mystery?" Glen asked bluntly.

Major Willard looked up and smiled. After a silence, he answered: "It is the 'Shang Kambu.'"

Sometimes the old traveler had his fun by playing a practical joke. He seemed to

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be having so much fun out of this that the callers became suspicious. Evidently he divined their fears, for his features sobered, and he hastened to assure: "I'm not joking this time. I really have made a wonderful discovery, and I have my reason for wishing to disclose it to you boys—these reasons being mainly in the fact that I need your help in demonstrating, or verifying, the worth and the virtue of the discovery."

The major was holding the vial near his eyes again. "It is possible, through the medium of this discovery, for one to go back and back, through the subconscious mind, into the dim and distant past. By swallowing a few drops of this liquid, the subject enters a condition of seeming unconsciousness—"

"Then, it is a new method of hypnotism, or mesmerism?" guessed Bush.

"No, it is not hypnotism, mesmerism, or any other 'ism,'" the major denied emphatically. "I hope you boys may understand at the start that the matters I am about to reveal to you are of a

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purely scientific nature. To get on the trail of this secret, I spent many weeks—yes, several months—in studying the Pitikas, or the ‘sacred books’ of the Dalai Llamas, in Lhasa. To accomplish this, I had first to win the confidence of the Grand Llama. I had first to prove to him that I was a profound student, one who had a genuine and sincere purpose, rather than a mere curiosity. Fortunately, I knew much of the Sanskrit, and my ability to read the books intelligently, as well as the proof I could give of my acquaintance with ancient history, assured the Llamas, and I was allowed to proceed.”

Major Willard laid the vial on the table, and the boys noted that even this slight agitation caused its contents to change from one bright color to another, settling finally into that peculiar shade of green. “My hobby has been the study of chemistry, and the ancient Llamas were remarkable chemists. They discovered, or evolved, many of the formulas now employed in our laboratories. But chem-

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istry, in ancient times, was a 'black art.' It had to be practiced secretly. For that reason a great number of the experiments and tests, or the formulas developed, were lost. By a fortunate circumstance, a goodly number of the formulas were set down in the so-called 'sacred books' of the Pitikas. It was these that I wanted—and was determined to get."

Once more the deep-lined features of the traveler broke into a smile. "I got some of them," he informed in a tone of modest triumph, "even though the Llamas, with jealous oversight, would not allow me to copy a single word from the books. Everything I took from the Pitikas I carried away in my memory. As the names of solutions and chemicals known and employed in ancient times were vastly different from analogous drugs and solutions of to-day, you may guess I had some difficulty deriving anything of a tangible nature from those musty volumes. Yet I did get this—the 'Shang Kambu'—so known and named by the ancient chemists."

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Major Willard raised the vial from the table with a brighter gleam of triumph twinkling in his eyes.

Keenly interesting as was all this, both Glen and Bush were at a loss to understand the meaning and the purpose of the revelation. Indeed, they as yet knew little of the real value, or nature, of the "Shang Kambu." Moreover, they could not guess the part they were to play in what the major had termed the "demonstrating or verifying of the discovery." But they exchanged quick, hopeful glances when the major remarked casually: "I am glad you boys have come in this morning, for I want you to get more out of your call than merely to listen to my tales."

Could it be possible the aged scientist intended for them to "swallow a few drops" of the mysterious liquid, and be taken back and back in their "subconscious minds to the dim and distant past"? They were soon to know.

"Certain as I am of the effectiveness, as well as the virtue, of the 'Shang

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Kambu,' " spoke the major, "I am yet to see it actually demonstrated. I can not do this myself. I must have the help of another. So I want one of you to take some of this liquid. I promise—yes, I actually know by repeated tests I made, first upon animals, then with a native youth in Tibet—that not the least physical injury will result. The 'Shang Kambu' induces sleep, quite different from that brought on by ether or other anesthetics. In its passing it causes no headache, nausea or dizziness. The subject dreams, and it is the dream itself, through the subconscious mind, that reveals a picture of the past. It is, in truth, as if the subject actually lived, or had a part in some activity, the date or time of this depending upon the amount of liquid taken."

Again a glance of eager anticipation passed between the chums. Both had all manner of faith in Major Willard, and either of them would have swallowed the whole bottle of "Shang Kambu" at a mere word from him. They were plainly disappointed when he added, in a tone of

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unnecessary precaution: "Before entering this experiment, I would rather you boys think it over. Anxious as I am to see it practically demonstrated, there is plenty of time. Talk it over just between yourselves, or with your parents, if you will. But keep in mind that it is a secret. I have no desire to make money out of it, but wish to place it in the hands of brother scientists, that it may be made of practical value in research work."

Major Willard turned to other subjects then, and kept the youthful callers interested with other tales of his extensive travels. Yet it must be said that, interesting as were these stories, the eyes of Glen and Bush turned time and again to the vial of pale-green liquid.

The mysterious "Shang Kambu" was the first thing the two talked about when their visit ended and they were out on the street. "That Pitikas and Grand Llama stuff has me going strong!" Bush declared.

"Same here!" Glen added. "I didn't like to rush matters, for I know it's not

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an easy matter to hurry the major. Just the same, I would gladly have taken a few drops of that back-to-the-ancients liquid, just to revel in a dream of bygone ages."

"That's the way I felt about it," Bush confessed. "It would be a lot easier, and much more interesting, than a lesson in ancient history. But I suppose it is just as well that we wait awhile. Evidently the major has many other things on hand just now, and wants plenty of time to work this thing out properly."

"Yes, he will be busy for several days," Glen informed knowingly. "He told me this morning he expected to have a call—a sort of secret conference, in fact—with a couple of Government agents this morning. This may be in connection with the 'Shang Kambu.' He has an appointment with them at his office—Hello! Here they are now!"

Just then a motor-car, bringing two dust-covered travelers, rolled up swiftly and came to a halt at the curbing. The man at the wheel pulled off a gauntlet,

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and, raising his goggles, glanced toward the youths on the walk. "Is Major Willard's office near here?" he inquired.

"Right here, sir," Glen answered, indicating the little building in the shade of the poplars. "The major is in his library now."

"Thanks!" the traveler responded. In a moment the two were out of the car, and, after shaking some of the road dust from their khaki uniforms, hurried through the gate and down the walk.

"They must be the Government agents Major Willard is expecting," Glen said. Bush Adams watched the visitors curiously. His gaze was directed especially to the smaller of the two. "I've seen that dark-skinned gent before," he remarked in a low voice. "He wore a khaki suit then—but not a uniform. I can't place him just now—but I'm wondering what sort of business he would have with the major."

Bush and Glen remained for awhile near the gate, considering how they could best employ the remainder of the day.

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They were surprised at seeing the late callers emerge from the office of Major Willard within five minutes—and with the strangers came the major himself. In that brief time the visitors had made known their business, impressed its urgency upon the scientist, got him into his hat and traveling-coat, and induced him to come along. Evidently they were in a hurry to get somewhere, for they walked with rapid strides. The smaller one, who took the lead, would not give the staring Bush as much as a single glance.

"I am called away unexpectedly, and must make a trip that will keep me away from home several days," Major Willard explained to the pair of wondering youths on the walk. "I wish you would put my office in order for me, please. Here is the key. Make such use of my books, or of my laboratory equipment, as you wish being careful to lock the door each time on leaving."

The big brass key was thrust into Glen's hand, and, before either he or Bush could ask a question, the travel-stained

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car boomed out of town, carrying the khaki-clad strangers and the old scientist.

"This is the first time I ever knew Major Willard to move as if he were actually in a hurry," Bush remarked. "I hope he knows what he's doing—"

"Those two gents in uniform evidently did some fast talking in order to hurry him off like this," Glen smiled. Then he flipped up the big brass key. "Well, we will obey orders and put his office in order."

As the pair started down the gravel walk toward the little building, Bush offered the query: "Do you s'pose the major rushed away and left that bottle of 'Shang Kambu' stuff on the table?"

"Not likely," Glen answered in a tone of doubt. "My guess is that it was the 'Shang Kambu' stuff, or something connected with it, those uniformed gents wanted to see."

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CHAPTER TWO.

VERY shortly the two boys entered the library of Major Willard. There was considerable disorder of books and papers, but no more than they had previously observed. In the laboratory a number of beakers and test-tubes, giving evidence of late use, were on the bench. But these, too, no doubt had been taken from the shelves early that morning or the evening before.

But when Glen and Bush turned to the little stand near the window, they gave their first exclamation of surprise. The plentiful folds of the stand-cover, which was itself a piece of rare linen, hand-embroidered, which the aged traveler brought from Ireland, had been hastily turned back, with the evident purpose of concealing something. Glen lifted a corner of the cover, and peered under it.

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"Here they are, Bush—both of 'em!" he remarked.

When the cloth was raised, the faded manuscript and the vial of pale-green liquid were revealed.

"It's a bit queer the major should have left this stuff here," Bush observed curiously, as he picked up the vial and examined it meticulously.

"He had no chance to put it away before the callers entered, and they rushed him away without giving him the opportunity," answered Glen. "He probably thought of it as he left, and depended on our taking care of it for him."

The interest of the boys in the vial and its mysterious content was more than mere curiosity. The major had revealed enough of its nature to keenly whet their desire to know more. The fingers of Bush trembled a little as he held the flask in the sunlight. He shook it, ever so lightly, and the magic fluid began at once to pass through a variety of changing tints and colors—from pale green to bright vermillion, then to purple, and from this to

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lavender, returning finally to its normal shade of green when it quieted.

"I wonder what it smells like—or if it has any odor at all," quizzed Bush, as he found the courage to carefully pull the glass stopper.

He had no need of putting the vial to his nose. As soon as the stopper was pulled, there came a pungent, spicy smell that quickly permeated every part of the laboratory.

"Not at all bad," mused Bush, smiling. "It has the smell of peppermint, winter-green and cloves, all combined. They say that most things taste as they smell, and, if that is so, this stuff ought to have a familiar savor—" He raised the open vial, and touched it with the tip of his tongue.

"Careful, Bush—careful!" Glen cautioned. "That stuff may be mighty strong. Just a drop of it may put you to sleep for a long time."

Bush Adams had no other intention than to be careful—extremely careful. But sometimes unexpected things happen

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even to the most careful. Thus did it happen that, when Bush raised that open vial to his tongue, a stack of books which Major Willard had left in a disordered pile fell to the floor with a crash. Bush, startled by the racket, jerked the vial too quickly, and an unknown quantity of the liquid—more than a drop, he knew—went down his throat!

Sputtering, terrified, Bush lowered the bottle and replaced the stopper, setting the vial on the table.

"Did you get any of it, Bush? Tell me—did you swallow some of the stuff?" Glen asked in an excited voice, as he jerked at his companion's arm.

"Yes—I did, Glen! I did!" Bush answered, leaning heavily against the table, and trembling, more from fear of consequences than from any effect of the mysterious liquid.

For a moment the two boys stood looking at each other, uncertain what to do. Their faces turned pale. Bush finally smiled. "Don't be scared on my account," he assured. "I'm all right. We



Sputtering and terrified, Bush lowered the bottle, replaced the stopper, setting the vial on the table

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know the stuff can't do me any harm. The major told us that. But I must say, Glen, I do begin already to feel a bit queer. It wasn't bad—that stuff—it's taste, I mean. Much like water with all manner of spices in it—only more sharp and pungent. And it's making me sleepy sure enough—sleepy. Take hold of me, Glen—I'm getting unsteady. Hold me quick—" Bush was tottering on his feet, and grasping the table as if to keep from falling.

Glen took him by the arm and guided him toward the big chair. He was filled with anxiety and grave uncertainty, in spite of Major Willard's absolute assurance that no physical harm would result from taking a portion of the mysterious "Shang Kambu." But Glen had no idea how much of it his companion swallowed, and it was this uncertainty that made him fearful. Glen's fears increased when Bush sank limp and helpless into the big chair. He was exactly like one who had been suddenly stricken with a deep slumber. His eyes closed, his hands rested on

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the arms of the chair, his head lay at ease on the cushioned back.

"Bush—oh, Bush! Wake up! Wake up!" Glen called and shouted and shook his companion; but Bush went deeper and deeper into slumber with every passing second. "Wake up, Bush! Don't go to sleep!" Glen yelled again, close into the ear of his chum.

But Bush did not wake up. In truth, Bush, in his last conscious moments, before the "Shang Kambu" gripped him in its anesthetizing influence, did his utmost to keep awake. But he could not keep his eyes open, nor drive off the feeling of extreme drowsiness that seemed to take him in its soothing, overpowering embrace. Even after he had sunk into the easy chair, he could hear his companion shouting and calling his name; but it was like some feeble, far-away voice that he tried in vain to answer. Then the rose-colored walls of the major's office, the brass chandelier, the curtains at the broad window—and Glen—all faded away as Bush seemed to be carried out into space,

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where all manner of colors and tints and shades flashed and floated.

It was as if he came out of this with a start. He heard the loud shouting and the heavy trampling of many feet, of cushioned feet on hard ground. And Bush found himself among a vast assemblage of men who were dressed in the skins of wild beasts, and who were armed with the rude weapons of ancient warfare. These men were stockily built, knotty-muscled, swarthy, thick-necked, with long, straight hair and close-set, narrow eyes.

It was an immense room in which these warriors were assembled. A great cavern it was, cut from the solid rock, with walls of stone, and a natural roof, or ceiling, of stone. There were numerous oblong openings on one side and a broad door admitted light.

The big chief was in command. He was far bigger, more powerful, more fierce in his looks than any of his fellows. At a sign from him, the warriors formed in grotesque battle array. Bush was one of the motley company. He trembled when

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the chief came toward him and beckoned a hairy hand. Bush followed out through the open door to the edge of a high cliff. From this eminence there was afforded a magnificent survey of the wide, green valley below. Above this valley lifted the bluffs, sheer, but cut with benches and shelves. Beyond the valley spread desert country, barren and arid. The valley and the lower bluff benches were watered from irrigating-ditches that ribboned the bluffs. Up here, on a higher shelf, broader than any of the shelves beneath, were rows of stone-hewn buildings, most of them squatty of structure, with here and there a taller one rising like a watch tower. Bush saw more than the green valley and the cliffs, more than the vast, arid desert as he followed the pointing hand of the chief and looked below. There was an army down there, in camp near the base of the bluff—or on the farther bank of the stream, not far from the bluff. There appeared to be a vast horde of men in this army, for the cone-shaped teepees fairly dotted the plain.

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"They have come again—our enemies! The men of copper skin!" spoke the chief in a peculiar guttural tongue. "They have come to destroy us—as they have come before—and as they will keep coming. They will make no peace! They are our eternal, never-tiring enemies! Already they have routed our toilers from the fields. Our copper-workers have been driven from the mines. Our people have sought the safety of the cliffs. We must drive them back! Drive them back to the land beyond the desert, whence they came!"

Courage, determination, brute strength and purpose were in the booming voice and the gestures of the chief. "You will help me, my brave comrade!" he told Bush. "From this hour I place you in second command. We must plan our order—and strike at once, with all our might and power!"

Bush proposed a division of their forces, one division to descend the cliffs at some convenient point out of view of the enemy, this division to attack the in-

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vaders from the rear, and thus cut off retreat, while the other division engaged them from the front.

This plan met the chief's approval. The two leaders returned to the assembly-room, and the division was made. Bush led his horde of fighters through a secret door, where the movement could not be observed by the enemy. Then, silently, the cliff warriors crept in ragged double file along the base of the upper shelf. They were armed with spiked clubs, slings and spears.

The line halted when it came to the end of a long, narrow crevasse. Then, after a brief reconnoiter, they clambered in barefooted silence up this narrow slit, finally reaching the mouth of a tunnel that opened into the face of the mountain. Entering this black tunnel, the warriors crawled along through the damp, dark passage till there came a peep of light ahead. Along the bluff, up the crevasse and through the tunnel Bush had led the long line. And he was the first to emerge from the end of the tunnel.

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Just below was the smooth, sandy beach of a river. The warriors came out of the tunnel and assembled on the river-beach, where Bush instructed them by low-spoken words and signs. A short distance downstream the river made a sharp bend, curving round the base of the high bluff. From the beach there was given a narrow glimpse of the green valley. At the border of that green valley the enemy had its camp.

Bush ordered two of his swiftest runners to return over the route they had come to inform the chief that one division had reached the valley in safety and was ready for the attack. Meanwhile, the company, with Bush leading, waded the shallow river. Reaching the other shore, the barefooted warriors resumed their silent march, making a wide detour through the concealing growth to reach the valley unobserved.

Finally all dropped to hands and knees, crawling like silent, determined beasts through the growth. There was a look of fierce determination in the gleaming

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eyes of the cliff fighters as they made ready to strike. Creeping on, like silent, stealthy beasts, they came out to the edge of the valley. Peering through the interlaced boughs of bushes and trees that had screened their silent approach, the warriors looked down upon the enemy's camp—scarcely more than a spear's-throw below.

CHAPTER THREE.

SCREENED by the growth of sage and juniper that bordered the vale, the cliff warriors waited till a smoke cloud, like a thin, blue veil, rose and spread above the upper shelf of the bluff. This was the signal that the chief and his men were ready.

Then all rose as one man, rushing like maddened beasts upon the enemy camp. The trampling of thousands of feet on the dry earth was like muffled thunder. The copper-skinned savages were taken by surprise. Still, there was no confusion—no retreat. The chiefs brought quick order, and held their horde of braves to face the foe.

Followed a hand-to-hand combat; a bedlam of yells, shouts, cries; the wild clatter of spear against shield, of trampling feet. Teepees were overturned,

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camp stuff scattered. Ponies, released from their tethers, went squealing across the plain, fleeing in wild terror from the scene of carnage.

Back and forth fought the copper-colored savages and the squatty warriors from the cliffs. It was a battle royal, even though barbarous. It was a contest for supremacy between the knotty-muscled men of the cliffs and the wiry, sinewy, fleet-footed savages of the plains. The men of the cliffs, though lacking nothing in courage, were far outnumbered. Slowly, but surely, they were driven back. Their chief was slain, as were most of his men. It seemed to Bush, second in command, that only a handful of his own company remained. Still, they kept fighting, yielding each inch of ground stubbornly. Battered and bleeding, the remnant of cliff warriors were forced back across the river and into the tunnel entrance.

With their backs to the cliff wall, they stood at bay, fighting dauntlessly on—holding the enemy horde at the point of the spear till the treasures of the terraced



With their backs to the wall, they stood at bay

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city—the copper and the metal—could be hidden in the caves. Then the remaining fragment of the cliff fighters, Bush among them, backed into the tunnel and closed the ponderous stone door.

The savages swarmed up the cliffs, thousands of them. Though hundreds were beaten back, other hundreds came on, and kept coming, till the stronghold of the terraced city was doomed.

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Bush opened his eyes vaguely. Glen was shaking him violently, and shouting in his ear. Slowly he became conscious of his surroundings, the clearing vision of familiar objects and things close at hand fading out the picture of battle and of bloodshed that lately filled his subconscious mind. But even while Glen shook him and called to him, Bush trembled with doubt and uncertainty. He rubbed his eyes as if to clear them of a blur. He looked again at the rose-colored ceiling of the major's library, stared into the eager and excited face of his companion. "Where have I been?" he asked.

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"You've been right here in this chair for four straight hours!" Glen assured. "I've all but pulled your arm off trying to wake you. I've thrown nearly a whole pitcher of cold water in your face. I would have gone for help, only for the fact that you gave every indication of being in a deep, peaceful slumber."

"It wasn't such a peaceful slumber—not in the matter of dreams, anyhow," Bush declared, stretching his arms and raising himself erect. Then he looked into Glen's wondering face, and smiled. "Say, but I've had a time! That 'Shang Kambu' stuff must have taken me back a thousand years or so. Talk about battles and bloodshed—oh! But that company of mine did put up a fight! We would have licked the copper-skinned savages all right, but they were too many for us. I'd like to know if they found our treasures—our copper and metals—"

"Treasures?" Glen exclaimed in a voice of sudden interest, eyeing Bush curiously. "Where have you been? Treasure-hunting, eh?"

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"Not exactly. I've been a cliff-dweller, Glen—a real, thick-necked, squat-warrior of the bluffs! Just to look at me now you wouldn't think it possible that I could be metamorphosed into a hairy, knotty-muscled brave carrying a sling and a spear. But that was what happened to me, in my subconscious mind at least, when I swallowed a few drops of that pale-green liquid."

Bush turned his awakening gaze toward the stand, and, while he looked at the vial, his eyes opened wider. An expression of sudden alarm came into his face. He reached and picked up the bottle. Its glass stopper had not been replaced. "It's empty, Glen—empty!" he exclaimed. "The 'Shang Kambu' has evaporated! Not a drop is left!"

While the two boys stared at the empty vial, a motor-car was heard to drone up and halt at the curbing near the gate. Glen hastily thrust the bottle into a drawer. Looking out, they saw a big, road-stained automobile, in which was a pair of khaki-uniformed travelers. At

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first glimpse, both the car and the passengers would have been taken for the same outfit that had appeared earlier in the day. But it was soon observed that one of the men was considerably heavier in build than either of the former callers. The two got out of the machine and came up the walk, casting swift, keen glances around, as if to make sure of the locality.

Glen opened the door. With a perfunctory salutation, the visitors stepped inside the library, throwing swift, keen glances from corner to corner of the room. They eyed the two boys sharply for a moment before making their business known. It was quite evident, by the look of disappointment on their bronzed faces, that they had not found things as they expected and hoped.

"We have come to see Major Willard on private business," one of the pair said finally.

"The major is not here," Glen informed.

"Not here?" the callers exclaimed. "We had a definite appointment with him

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to-day. We are some three hours late, on account of a road accident—but he must have known the urgency of our business, and would not have left—”

“Two other men, wearing uniforms, and traveling by motor-car, arrived here this morning,” Bush exclaimed. “They seemed in much of a hurry. Anyhow, they were in the office only a few minutes—just long enough to induce the major to put on his hat and coat and leave with them. They made off as hastily as they came, taking Major Willard with them.”

The callers eyed each other silently, the expression of sober concern and disappointment deepening on their weathered features. “It looks as if we’re beat, Joe,” one remarked. Then he turned to Glen. “Could you give us a detailed description? The color of the car? its license number? the size of the two men—”

“It was a brown machine, and considerably road-soiled. I didn’t note the license number. The men were more slight of build than either of you gentlemen. They were smooth-shaven, sun-

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tanned, and both dressed in regulation uniform, with leather puttees—"

"We know them!" the larger of the two callers assured. "They are impostors, and they worked a smooth game."

Glen and Bush now became alarmed. The same fear came into the mind of both. "They were not Government men? Is that what you mean?" Bush wanted to know. "And they induced Major Willard to go with them—to leave here under false pretenses?"

"If you're guessing, you've hit it exactly right," came the reply. "The two gents who beat us here, and got away with the major, actually and literally kidnaped the scientist."

"What could be their purpose in doing such a thing?" questioned Glen. "What will they gain by it? Major Willard only lately returned from an extended trip abroad. Most of our own townspeople have yet to learn of his arrival."

The callers came deeper into the library, and they exchanged more silent glances before speaking further. "You

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boys are well acquainted with the major?" one of them asked.

"Quite well," Glen informed proudly. "We visit him here at his library at frequent intervals when he is home. We came this morning in response to an invitation from him. He had something—well—an important—and secret—" The youth hesitated, and, catching a warning look from his companion, added hurriedly: "The major had an interesting story to tell us of his late discoveries."

"You need have no hesitancy in telling us anything that has a bearing on this matter," assured the Government men. The boys were then given information that directly concerned some matters they already knew. "We are exposing no secret when we say that Major Willard made a remarkable discovery in chemistry while following research work in a foreign country. Before sailing for home, he sent on to the Patent Office a vial containing a solution that embodied a secret formula. Before this vial came under the jurisdiction of the American mails, it fell

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into unscrupulous hands. These parties learned of its peculiar nature, but were unable to identify the formula. Being foiled in their repeated attempts by department agents, they followed up the major, learned in some manner of our intended appointment, and, reaching here this morning, made him think they were the real Government agents, and—"

"And made off with him!" the boys finished.

"That's exactly what happened. Where they went, and what foul work they may do, can only be conjectured. Anyhow, we must be moving on, before the trail gets any colder. Should you boys get hold of any clew, kindly notify the sheriff. We will inform that officer of our intended movements." With no further questions, the Government men turned hurriedly from the office. Bush and Glen, staring silently at each other, their minds filled with growing anxiety, heard the motor-car boom off and away.

Bush was the first to speak. "Glen, it's up to us to get on the trail of the

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major, and stick to it till we find him!"

"Those are my sentiments!" Glen responded with equal determination and purpose. "It's our duty to find the major—or to do our best in the attempt. The Government men and the sheriff will, of course, take up the search at once. But they have nothing more tangible or definite to guide them than we have. And we certainly have a very slim clue. We have no idea which way the big car went, or what the kidnapers intend to do—"

"Yes, we do," Bush brought in. "Anyhow—since I have been under the magic spell of that 'Shang Kambu,' I've a very definite idea about some things. I want you to know, Glen, that scenes, places, actions were pictured to me as clearly and distinctly as though I had actually seen and lived them. I believe that one of those impostors, who undoubtedly are the parties who stole the vial of solution sent by the major from Tibet, tasted some of the liquid and had practically the same experience as came to me. I would not say, of course, that his dream, or subcon-

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scious vision, was identical with mine, for it is unlikely that it would have exactly the same effect on different minds. But those men are satisfied of the peculiar power of the 'Shang Kambu,' and will attempt to force Major Willard to reveal the formula."

"They don't know Major Willard!" declared Glen. "He would die before he would tell them. Just the same, he needs our help, and we should do our utmost to rescue him. If you have any plan—anything—"

"I have, partner—I have!" Bush assured. "Will you go with me, even though I lead you over a mighty rough trail?"

"Go with you? Sure I'll go!" Glen answered. "I merely want to be satisfied that you know which way you are going, and what you are going for."

"I know both!" Bush spoke positively. "The place where we are going is familiar to me. I have been there twice—once in the flesh, as a chain-carrier for a surveying crew, and again in that Shang Kambu vision. It's all clear to me, Glen

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—perfectly clear—the terraced village of the cliffs, out in the canyon of the San Juan—”

“But how do you connect that kidnaping pair with the old cliff village?” Glen inquired doubtfully. “What makes you think they would strike for such a region of desolation?”

“Because one of them is Gus Moser! I recall him now distinctly,” Bush spoke with absolute decision. “I remarked this morning that one of the two looked familiar. That one was Gus, and no mistake. He was a member of our surveying crew, and such a mean one that the boss had to discharge him. It would be natural for him to strike that way now, as he would expect no one to follow them there. But we will! By taking the train to Phoenix, and outfitting there, we will be on their trail by to-morrow’s sun. Are you on, Glen? Are you on?”

“On? I’m ready to start right now!” Glen answered heartily.

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CHAPTER FOUR.

BUSH and Glen, after hurried preparations, left that night for the capital city of Arizona. Shortly after sunrise the following morning they had secured an outfit of a pair of saddle-horses and a pack animal, and were on their way. Before leaving, they went the rounds of the garages to make inquiry concerning cars that had arrived since the day before. And they learned that one big machine, road-stained, and giving evidence of having come through a hard run, arrived during the night. There were three men in the car, so the boys were informed, two of these wearing regulation Government uniforms, and appearing to be officers. The third was an elderly gentleman, clad in a gray traveling-coat and a checked tweed suit. The big car took on a supply of fuel, then boomed on its way.

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"That car carried the pair of impostors—and the major—I'm sure!" Bush declared confidently. Subsequent inquiry brought the knowledge that the machine had taken the main desert road in the direction of the San Juan. "They are headed for the region of the ancient cliff-dwellers, all right," he added confidently. "But they will find mighty rough going before they get near their destination."

That this latter prediction was not far wrong became evident when the two youths, during the day's hard ride, crossed sand stretches where a motor-car had left a crooked mark. In one place a tire, blown out and tattered, had been discarded.

"Looks as if we may overtake them," Glen ventured hopefully. "For it must have been that big brown car that plowed through here."

"You're right," Bush agreed. "Our ponies may be slow—but they're sure—and we can hold to a steady pace."

Hold to a steady pace they did, all through the long day, with only a brief

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halt at noon under the scant shade of a juniper-tree. By this time they were well out in the desert, and the sun beat hot upon the arid plains, what though it was mid-September. All afternoon, and till the purple shades of dusk fell over the yellow sands, the two youths and the trio of cayuses traveled. It was nearly dark when they reached a water-hole, and a favorable camp at the mouth of the canyon, a short distance from the base of a high, terraced bluff. In the pink-tinted light of the setting sun these terraces stood out in bold relief against the yellow cliffs, and revealed a ragged array of crumbling structures.

Here the tired ponies were relieved of their loads and tethered. While Glen fed them and made ready for the night's camp, Bush started on a reconnoiter in order to use what remained of daylight. He was urged to do this by the fact that they were now in a familiar region to him. He knew the wagon road terminated at a point not more than a half-mile farther on. The motor-car tracks, still followed,

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appeared to have been lately made, and led on up the canyon. But Bush was confident the heavy machine could not proceed much farther.

He climbed the bluffs, the base of which was already darkened by the shades of the desert's quick-falling night. Up on the second terrace, which he reached after a hard scramble, he came out into the pink-tinted glow of sunset. Farther up, the day's bright light still lingered. At the rim of the high ledge, Bush paused to get his breath and to make a survey. With his first glimpse he uttered a startled exclamation. Just beyond him, or at the opposite side of the terrace, the broken ruins of a huge stone structure squatted under the bluff. Evidently the greater portion of this structure had once been excavated from the natural rock of the cliff. When Bush gazed at the broken entrance, and turned for a look out over the forsaken, desert-blown valley, whose dry river-bed lay under the purple shadows of falling night, it was as if he were carried back to a corresponding in-

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cident of some former time. He had climbed up here before, while out with the surveying crew, but he had given little attention to the spot, other than a cursory examination of the ruins. But now it seemed as if he stood on ground he oft had frequented. And he recalled most vividly the peculiar mind picture seen by him while under the spell of the "Shang Kambu," in which the big chief and himself had come out here to the edge of the bluff for a survey of the valley, where the enemy camp could be seen, and to lay plans for attack before the beginning of the mighty battle.

"This is the place—the identical spot!" Bush declared half aloud. "The mouth of the hidden tunnel must open from this terrace, a mile or so farther on—"

Bush ceased his musings and dropped down quickly. With startling suddenness two men, moving like shadows, came into view from beyond a pile of ruins. They were talking in low tones, but with considerable excited gesticulation. Both

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wore uniforms, and were dust-covered. Their caps and motor-goggles indicated they had been late passengers on an automobile.

"Gus Moser and his mate!" spoke Bush, under his breath. He dodged into hiding behind a scraggly sage-bush. Fortunately for him, the men were much concerned with their own talk, and gave little attention to surrounding things. They passed within a short three yards of where Bush was concealed.

"I'm afraid we'll never make the old gent squeal," one of the two said.

"Yes, he will. We will keep him in that tunnel till he is forced to squeal!" the other one declared, and when he spoke, Bush recognized the voice of Gus Moser. "I'm satisfied he knows where that ancient metal is concealed. Along with the metal must be all manner of valuable treasures. I saw the stuff plainly enough when I was under the spell of the 'Shang Kambu,' and the old major undoubtedly had the same experience when he made his tests. They would be more

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clear to him, and he could point them out if he is made to do so—"

The voice to which Bush listened with bated breath then trailed off into a muffled monotone, finally disappearing altogether. When he raised up, the figures of the two men were disappearing along the winding route of the terrace. "So it's the treasures that pair want, eh?" the youth exclaimed to himself. "They have no desire for the formula, or they realize they can not get it. But they think they can force the major to show them something that he may never have seen—even in a dream. Well, it's the major we want—and we are here to get! They have left him in the tunnel—helplessly bound, no doubt—and are now going to their car, which will give Glen and me a chance to effect a rescue."

He made the guess that the two men would return to the tunnel within the course of an hour, and make another attempt to extract the desired information from their captive. If a rescue was effected, it would mean quick work for the

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youths. As soon as he could safely do so, Bush crawled out from his hiding-place and scrambled with all haste down the sheer bluff wall. He tore his clothes, he scratched his hands, and had two head-long falls down the precipitous face of the cliff, but he reached the valley floor considerably ahead of the slower-moving pair, whose route took them by a winding course from the terrace.

Fortunately, Glen had not started a fire. Screened as they were by the growth that fringed the water-hole, the smallest sort of a light, or the smell of camp smoke, would have revealed their presence to any observer.

"Hold up, pardner—don't strike that match!" Bush cautioned, when he hurried up, breathlessly, and checked his companion in the act of drawing a match across his boot.

"You look as if you had had a hard run—and had been in a real mix-up!" Glen exclaimed, when he noted the tattered state of his comrade's clothes, his scratched and bleeding hands.

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"You've guessed it the first time," Bush assured. "I've been up to the second terrace—for a look around—and that pair of kidnapers came along. Almost stepped on me. They've left the major in a tunnel—I know where it is. Come on! We'll rescue him—while the two are gone and before they return!"

Glen wasted no time asking questions. He was on his feet in an instant. Darkness was now filling the lower vale. Hurrying out to the base of the bluff, the two paused and waited. Shortly they heard voices and muffled footfalls. The shadows of two men passed by.

"That's Gus and his mate!" Bush whispered.

When the pair of shadows disappeared, Bush and Glen began their climb to the terrace. Cautious as they were, they dislodged many noisily clattering shale stones, and themselves barely missed a headlong fall from the bluff. Gone of breath, they crawled out on the upper ledge rim, lying awhile to rest and to listen. Deep silence reigned in the ancient

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city of the cliff-dwellers—a silence as intense and mysterious as the desert itself. Stars blinked down from the velvet vault close overhead, and the somber outline of the chasm walls lifted into the darkening night.

"Come on—pardner!" Bush said, rising up and leading the way. They proceeded swiftly, but cautiously, to avoid dangerous falls over the boulder-strewn ground. They passed the broken entrance to the bluff cave, went under a tottering wall of a structure that must have been an ancient watch-tower. For a mile or more they followed the winding street, passing ruin after ruin, and coming finally to the black maw of a stone-arched tunnel. Unhesitatingly, Bush entered this, blinking his electric flashlight for the first time, and to guide their way.

They had not proceeded far into the tunnel when a familiar voice, muffled, yet determined, called gruffly: "Stop where you are—you skulking hounds! You may as well turn back if you think you will get anything out of me—"

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"Major! Major Willard!" Bush and Glen exclaimed in chorus. "This is Bush and Glen! Don't be frightened—"

"Frightened? I guess not!" the old major answered. "I haven't been frightened! It would take more than a pair of human coyotes to scare me! But say, this seems too good to be true! I can scarcely believe my eyes!"

With his feet and hands helplessly bound, the major was left sitting with his back to the stone wall of the cave. He peered blinkingly toward the light when Bush and Glen approached, speaking words of assurance.

"How did this happen, anyway? How did you get on our trail in such quick time?" Major Willard's tone was one of utter incredulity.

"It's too long a story for us to tell now," Glen said, as he began loosening the bonds that held the major captive.

Bush blinked the flashlight intermittently. "Yes, it's a long story," he added, "and it's all tangled up with the 'Shang Kambu.' Just now, the main

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thing with us is to make our escape before that pair returns. They won't be gone long, for it will be blindly dark on the ledge inside of an hour."

"We will have to meet them," the major declared. "And the odds will be against us, for they are armed—both of them—and they won't hesitate about shooting."

"They will have no chance to try their ammunition on us," declared Bush. "For we won't need to meet them, Major."

Both Glen and the aged captive wondered how an escape could be effected without a face-to-face meeting with the armed pair. But they soon learned. When the major had been helped to his feet, and was given time to regain strength in his benumbed limbs, Bush started off, flashing the blinking torch. But he went in the opposite direction than the tunnel's mouth!

"Not that way, Bush—not that way!" Glen cautioned.

"You are diving deeper into the tunnel!" the major added.

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"I know it," Bush answered assuringly. "I've been in here before—twice before. And I know the way!" On and on, following the course of the winding passage, sometimes creeping, sometimes crawling through places where the tunnel was all but filled with shattered stone and broken shale, Bush led the way. Any one with less assurance would have turned back, or given up hopelessly, for it seemed impossible that this subterranean passage could lead anywhere else but deeper into the bluff. Once the flashlight revealed a broadening, high-ceiled cavern with crumbling, ponderous stone doors on the deeply recessed walls.

The three paused here awhile, gazing around with bated breath, and in silent wonder. "Behind those heavy doors, in the deep recesses of the cavern, the ancient cliff-dwellers hid their treasures!"

"Treasures!" ejaculated Glen and the major in low tones of amazement. And the old scientist, fixing a wondering gaze on Bush when the light flashed again, added: "Then, you must have been under

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the spell of the 'Shang Kambu,' else how should you know—"

"I was, Major," Bush answered. "But of that you shall know later. We must be going now—for time is passing. These treasures—or these caverns, anyhow—will supply future work for us—work that can not be done to-night."

Through the sunken door the trio passed, crawled the full length of a long, narrow passage, and at an unexpected moment felt the sweet, pure air of night, with the stars blinking overhead. They had come out through the ragged hole of a cave entrance, in a dense thicket of sage and cactus. Just below lay the dry bed of the ancient river, with the somber bluff wall lifting a short distance beyond.

"Our camp is less than a mile down there—near the mouth of the canyon," said Bush, as he raised a pointing finger.

"And that big motor-car is closer by," brought in the major. "That pair of smooth gents, who made away with me, and made me think, till I got out here,

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they were Government experts who wanted my assistance in identifying some newly discovered, mysterious metal, could get their machine no farther than the end of the cliff road."

"And we'll go down there first," said Bush. "It's likely Gus Moser and his pal—"

"You speak as if you're acquainted with one of those gents," brought in the major, curiously.

"I am," assured Bush. "And he is all that you take him to be—a first-class scamp! But this is the time he is playing a losing game. He and his pardner are due for a long, long hike over the hot sands. We'll fix their chug wagon so they can not move it till help comes! Then we'll go for our ponies. Come on! That pair are probably up near the tunnel's mouth now, and making a desperate search for their escaped captive."

In a few minutes the three drew near the spot where the big car rested in the sandy road. They waited a few moments, listening, and to make sure there

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was nobody around. Then they hurried down, and in a few brief seconds the ignition-keys were removed, both of which had been left in place. But to make the plight of the luckless pair doubly sure, the drain-cock to the gasoline-tank was opened, and the precious store of fuel allowed to waste itself on the desert.

"Come on!" Bush urged again, in a gleeful tone. "We have an outfit that needs no gas to travel the desert. It's slow—but it's sure!"

They could not travel that mile over the sandy ground to the camp by the water-hole and replace saddles and packs on the cayuses in less than forty minutes, much as they hurried. And that pair of determined men on the terrace, having discovered their loss, made haste to recapture the one who eluded them. Just as the nervously hurrying trio were mounting the jaded cayuses with the purpose of making out for the canyon, footfalls were heard on the bluff trail.

"Halt!" an angry voice commanded. But the two boys and the major, now

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mounted, struck down the road as fast as the tired legs of the ponies could take them.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Three pistol-shots came in quick succession. Bullets whined through the still night air, but went wild of their intended mark.

"Come on! Come on!" Bush called to his companions, as his own beast led off at a forced gallop. Intermingled with the thudding of hoofs on the sandy road were other shouts and cries, and more revolver reports. But the escaping outfit went untouched and unscathed, diving deeper into the night shadows, and maintaining a pace, in spite of the leg-weariness of the ponies, that the two on foot could not long keep up.

"We beat them! We beat them!" Glen shouted triumphantly, when a long margin of safety had been thrown to the rear. "They won't try to follow us, and they can't do it, even if they try! They will probably be waiting back there, by their stranded car, when the sheriff comes for them!"



“Come on! Come on!” Bush called to his companions, as his own
beast led off at a forced gallop

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This latter statement proved a true prophecy. At the first convenient place the escaping outfit, dead tired, halted and made camp. Before the cayuses were tethered and the blankets spread, a motor-car boomed up the desert road, on its way toward the San Juan. Two men, both armed, leaped out of the car and approached the trio squatted near the newly built fire. The men were in uniform, and were recognized at once as the Government agents who had visited the major's office. "Beg your pardon," spoke one of the two, replacing his revolver, "we are on the trail of three men, who took this road, and we wanted—"

"You'll find two of them waiting by their stranded car, at the mouth of the San Juan canyon," Bush informed. "As for the third, Major Willard, we have him here. We found him, my companion and I, tied and bound in a tunnel, up on the cliff terrace. We stole a march on his captors—"

"Why, look here, Joe!" exclaimed the Government agent in a voice of surprise,

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as he drew his associate nearer the fire and indicated the pair of smiling youths. "These are the same boys we met in the major's office. And they have beaten us by a whole lap. Say, boys, did you come out here in a flying-machine?"

"Something slower—but more sure than a flying-machine, for desert travel, when you want to keep near the ground," answered Bush, laughingly.

"But what gets us is how you got such a sure scent on the trail—"

"It's a long story," assured Bush, truthfully.

"And we can't hear it now. We must nab that pair before they slip out of our fingers again." The Government men turned to their car, and, after hearing a few words of definite direction concerning the road and the location of the stranded machine, boomed on their way. Awhile later, when silence fell over the desert camp, and a million stars twinkled from the dark-blue canopy overhead, Bush told the major what had occurred back at the office—told it frankly, truth-

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fully and in detail, and ending it with the admission that the vial of precious liquid had been allowed to evaporate.

Major Willard sat for a full minute or longer, after Bush had finished speaking, and stared into the dying coals of the scant camp-fire. "The 'Shang Kambu' is lost—lost to the world," he remarked lowly, but in a tone devoid of censure or of blame. "Not a drop of it remains, to my definite knowledge, and I have forgotten the formula. Which matters little, anyway, since you, my young friends have proved its power and its virtue. For by no other means than this, coupled with your pluck and your courage, your good sense and judgment, could I have been rescued. Let's turn now to our blankets—and sleep the sweet sleep of the desert kind."

THE SPRING ON BLISTERED ROCK

CHAPTER ONE.

TRAILING the cloud of alkali dust, the creaking, heavily laden wagon, drawn by a slow-going mule team, turned off the main desert road at the southern border of Juniper Flat. Half-way across the "flat"—which really was no flatter than all the plains country round it—the outfit reached a clutter of shacks, sheds, pole shanties, vacant, and in a sad state of repair. Going in through the broken gate, the mule team halted in the scant shade of the juniper-pole stable.

"Here we are!" the driver announced in the glad voice of the tired traveler who has reached his journey's end. He was a clean-faced youth, with neck and arms thoroughly bronzed by the desert wind and sun.

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“Yes, this is it,” he repeated, tossing down the lines and stretching himself. “This is the Blistered Rock Ranch—or what remains of it. Father showed me the corners when we were out here last fall. It isn’t so much for looks, Bain; but it gives abundant promise—and it’s ours—all ours!”

Bain Stevens smiled through the alkali dust that powdered his face. “Blistered Rock is about right,” he remarked humorously, gazing round. “Whoever named this ranch knew how to tag things, anyhow. Some time in the dim future this Juniper Flat country may blossom like the rose; but just now it seems to be chiefly the habitat of rock-lizards and horned toads.”

“It isn’t as bad as it looks, Bain—really it isn’t!” enthused the younger brother. “There are forty acres down on the ravine floor that will grow good barley, just as it stands, by dry-land farming. And when the Government canal is finished, and this place gets under water—as it certainly will—we can grow more

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stuff than eight mule teams can haul to market.”

“Sure! Sure!” Bain agreed. “That Government water can’t reach Blistered Rock any too soon to suit me. Even a few drops of something moist would be soothing to my parched throat right now.”

“Water! Say, big brother, we have the best water on earth! Spring water, too, clear as crystal and as cold—cold—”

“Stop!” yelled Bain, raising a protesting hand. “Show me that crystal fountain at once, before I utterly famish.”

They dropped off the wagon, and started toward the near-by coulee as fast as their stiffened limbs could carry them. A portion of the rim was a sheer bluff of volcanic rock and scoria. In a shallow basin, shaded by the gnarled junipers, a fissure opened, and out of this trickled a tiny stream. A portion remained in the basin, and to such thirsty creatures as the late comers to Blistered Rock this water-hole was a welcome sight.

Bain dropped flat on his stomach, and dipped his face into the pool. After two

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generous gulps, he raised and made a wry face. "Clear as crystal and cold as dish-water!" he declared. "Well, it's wet, anyhow, Andy—and that helps! So here goes!"

They both drank till they could drink no more. "Yes, it's wet," the younger brother agreed, raising up and drying his moist face with his sleeve. "And we can make it bigger and better by digging it out more. It's the salvation of Blistered Rock Ranch—till the Government water gets here. Only for this spring, father and I never would have considered taking the abandoned claim."

"It's the only hopeful thing I've seen so far," spoke Bain, frankly. "But I may find something else when we've dug in awhile. We might as well begin digging, for there's plenty of it to do."

Truly, there was work a-plenty in rehabilitating the abandoned ranch. Nor was it otherwise than the two brothers had expected. They had not come to the Blistered Rock on a quest for the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow. While

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Andy unhitched the mules and watered them from the spring, to later give them a feed of mashed barley in the scant shade of the pole stable, Bain prepared lunch. Neither of the boys had eaten a bite since five that morning. And it was now mid-afternoon. They had made a long, steady drive, in order to reach their destination in ample time to get settled before darkness dropped.

The ramshackle shanty that once had served as a human habitation was found to be utterly unfit even as a place in which to eat a tardy snack. So Bain spread luncheon in the shade of a juniper-tree. Out of the store of supplies brought on the wagon, he produced a tempting feast.

Andy smacked his lips appetizingly. "This certainly must be a land of plenty," he remarked, as he promptly responded to Bain's command to "pitch in." "Just see what we have here! Cold tongue, pickles, sandwiches and sardines—where nothing grew before!"

"And don't forget the canned milk," reminded the older brother.

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“Sure not,” brought in Andy, apologetically. “But we will have something better than the canned article when we get this old Blistered Rock—to—”

“Blistering!” finished Bain, as he mopped his perspiring brow. “Seems to me it’s doing that right now.”

The meal finished, the two brothers began unloading the wagon of its miscellaneous cargo of canned goods, flour, bacon, sheets of tin, nails, lumber, feed, tools, boxes, and all manner of stuff needed as a beginning for business on the Blistered Rock Ranch. Such things as live stock, plows and farming implements were to come later. As Bain had said that afternoon, the first thing needed was a place in which they themselves could “roost.” It was a question of either reconstructing the battered shanty, or of building a new one. The boys decided they would build a new one, using as much of the material in the old as could be salvaged.

Not much in the way of actual building was accomplished that afternoon.

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Both Bain and Andy were certain that a more suitable location could be found for the house. The former shanty was set too far from the spring. And it had been perched on an exposed knoll, where it had the full benefit of desert wind and sun. They decided to erect the new one nearer the water supply, and close under the high sand ridge that lay piled along the rim of the coulee.

“It’s queer how these desert folks stick their shanties on top of ridges, or set them out on exposed places just as far from shade and windbreaks as they can put them,” remarked Andy. “Take a look at that one across the way, won’t you?” He indicated a badly weathered little house that squatted like a sage-hen on an elevated knoll a mile beyond the coulee. This little shanty and its accompanying brood of pole stables and sheds was the only structure within sight of the Blistered Rock.

“Yes, I took note of that desert mansion some time ago,” Bain responded, as he shaded his eyes and looked over.

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“And by the way, Andy, that must be the home of our nearest neighbor, old Bird Weaver, of whom we were told—and warned—down at Chaparral.”

“He’s a queer old ‘Bird,’ I’ll warrant,” smiled Andy. “Yet he hasn’t proved himself the curious, pestering individual the land agent described. In fact, I haven’t seen a living thing over that way yet. I would like to meet him—really I would. Since he is to be our closest neighbor, we ought to become acquainted, and get on good terms at the start.”

“We’ll probably meet him soon enough,” Bain declared. “The land agent said he would be troublesome—laying claim to things that didn’t belong to him, and making boasts about his rights and privileges. But what there is—or was—on this forsaken ranch that he would want, I can’t guess.”

That evening, while Andy was making place for the mules in the pole stable, Bain went down to the spring for a pail of water.

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While stooped over the rock basin, filling the bucket, he heard the thumping of hoofs on the coulee floor. He jerked himself erect, and turned around. An old man, riding a gray mule, had approached to within a few yards of the spring. His white, unkempt hair hung in long, straggly locks beneath the brim of his slouched hat. His beard covered his sun-browned chest, his faded blue shirt and his corduroy trousers were tattered and worn. The saddle in which he sat, erect as some desert Arab, had seen better days.

The gray mule came to a halt without any word of command.

"Hello!" greeted Bain. He was almost on the verge of saluting the old man by name. He was confident he could be none other than Bird Weaver.

"Howdy!" returned the patriarch, his keen eyes fixed in a steady gaze on the youth. "Be ye one of the newcomers?"

"I be," answered Bain. "My name is Bain Stevens. My brother Andy is here too. We just arrived this afternoon. We've relocated the Blistered Rock."

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“So I suspicioned,” cut in the old man. “I’m Bird Weaver. My place adjoins. I’ve lived here a long time. And I want to ask—are you goin’ to take water from this spring?”

Up till this moment, the appearance, manner, and even the speech, of the aged rider of the gray mule had been amusing; but with this final query, made in an uncompromising voice of challenge, Bain’s ire was aroused. The question seemed both impertinent and irrelevant. Moreover, it forcefully reminded the youth of the warning given himself and brother that morning in regard to the possible meddling of their eccentric neighbor.

“Yes—of course we will take water from this spring,” Bain answered, as kindly as he could. “It will be our only water supply till a Government canal is built. Anyhow, why shouldn’t we use it? The spring is ours. It’s on the Blistered Rock, and we’ve relocated the claim.”

“No; you’re wrong,” the old man said. “It isn’t yours. It’s mine. It’s on my claim.”

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This brazen declaration from old Bird Weaver roused Bain Stevens' indignation. It seemed so absurd, so unfair and untruthful that its direct utterance, for the time being, made the youth utterly speechless. He stood and silently glared into the grizzled countenance of the desert patriarch while the latter continued to talk in that tantalizing, twanging voice.

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CHAPTER TWO.

YEP, it's mine—this spring," old Bird reiterated. "It misses your claim by a fraction. Your line runs right through here—between that split rock on the coulee rim and that juniper-tree over yonder." He indicated the landmarks as he talked. "That land agent who was here with your father and brother last fall may have said this spring was on the Blistered Rock. But it ain't. Not by a jugful. I know. I've lived here a long time."

Bain raised a protesting hand, and started to speak, but old Bird paid no attention.

The twanging voice went on: "I'm not givin' you orders to stop takin' water from the spring. You can use it as much as you please—till I say quit. I jus' want you to know it's mine—that's all." He

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pulled the gray mule round, and rode off.

Bain watched him go. His blood continued to leap through his veins. His whole being seemed aflame with indignation. It required some time for him to get control of himself. "I s'pose I shouldn't be so badly worked up about it," he concluded finally. "He is an old man, and has lived out here in the desert a long time. For that reason we should be kindly disposed toward him. But it is queer that he should claim the spring—the only good thing on Blistered Rock."

Andy laughed good-naturedly when told of the neighbor's call. He passed over old Bird's claim of ownership to the spring with a smile. "We must accept old Bird in the same generous spirit that we take the rock-lizards and the horned toads—as a necessary part of the desert. After while we'll like them—actually like them, Bain. Of course we will! We don't want to get sour on anything this early in the game, do we? Sure not."

Andy smiled yet more, happily, and pointed toward the west. "Look at those

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sunset colors beyond the Vermillion Cliffs. Did you ever see such crimson, such gold, such wonderful shades of blue and purple and lavender? The desert glare is fading now, and will keep fading till the stars come out. Just whiff this breeze! It starts when the sun goes down—and it gets cool, deliciously cool. Why, it's very life to a man. Whiff of it, Bain—drink it in!”

Andy stood up and inhaled till his inflated chest seemed on the verge of bursting. “It's great, big brother! It's great—this life on the desert!”

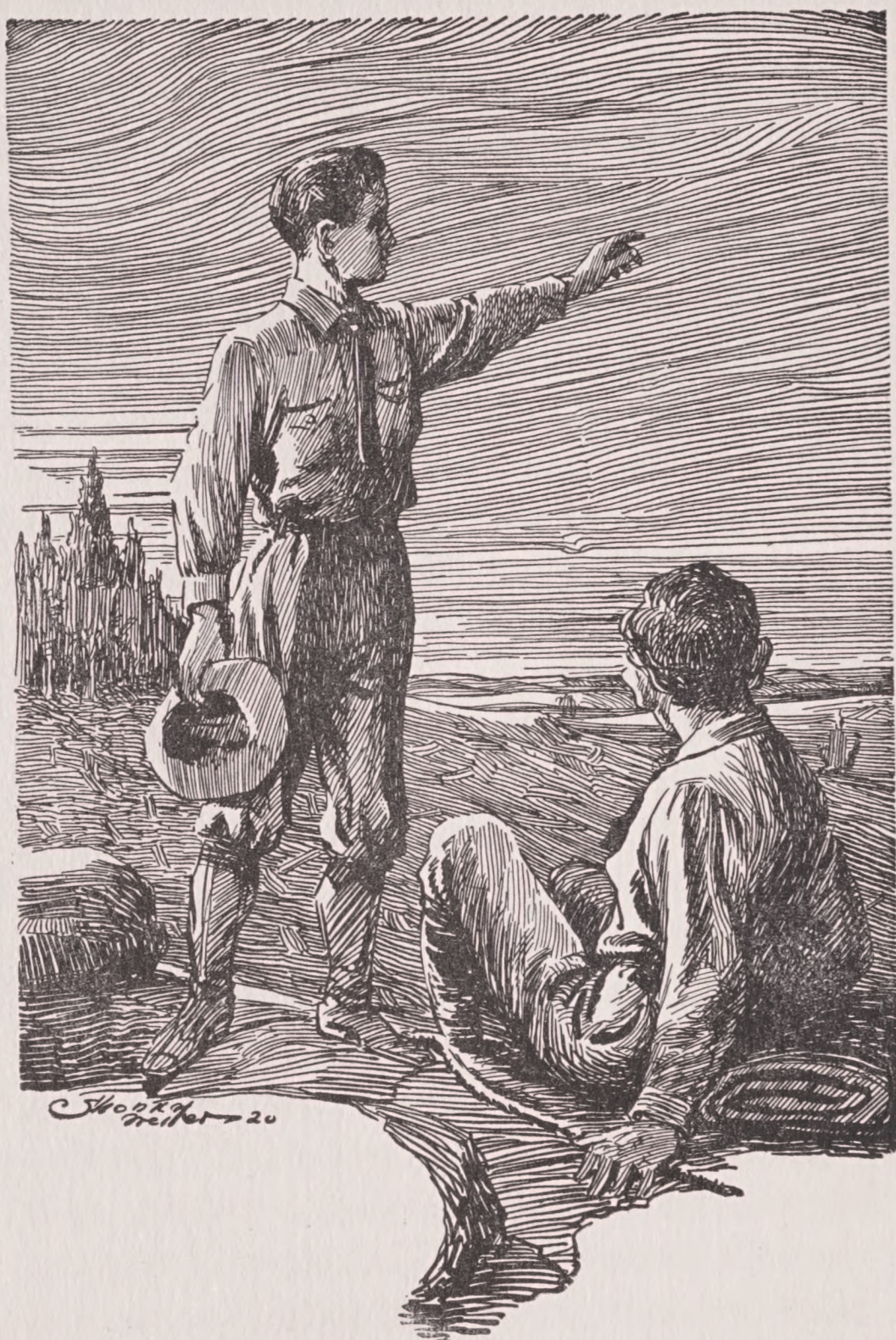
Bain was slow to catch Andy's enthusiasm. His gaze was held on that tiny patch of weathered gray—the little shanty on the knoll beyond the coulee rim. It was fast fading from sight, that tiny patch—merging into the purpling shadows that were creeping over the desert. Yet even its passing could not take from the older brother a lurking sense of trouble. A confusing array of doubts, uncertainties, fears and possibilities went through his brain.

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“Suppose old Bird was right?” he asked himself. “Suppose the spring was not on the Blistered Rock claim—what then?”

Andy, noting his brother's continued look of trouble, demanded again: “Forget it, Bain—forget it! There are other birds in the desert than the one you met at the spring. You'll probably like the others when you've heard them sing. And look up there—just over the blunt point of the Sore Thumb; the first star is coming out, and the sun is scarcely down. Say, big brother, this is great! This life on the desert is the real thing!”

They ate supper, and spread their blankets near a convenient juniper-tree. Early the next morning work on the new shanty started in real earnest. The old shack, or what remained of it, had first to be torn down and dismantled. Desert storms had broken and battered it, and transient travelers, making camp near the coulee spring, had used what remained for fuel. In the work of hammering and sawing, Bain lost his anger and worry of



“And look up there—the first star is coming out, and the sun is scarcely down. Say, big brother, this is great!”

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the evening before. He decided, with his good-humored brother, that it was best to put old Bird Weaver out of mind. Undoubtedly, the desert patriarch was more to be pitied than feared.

Anyhow, they had work to do—real work—the two of them, in the rehabilitation of the Blistered Rock. Every part and portion of the abandoned ranch must be rebuilt and reconstructed. It seemed a herculean task. But the two youths, filled with the unlimited enthusiasm of youth, buckled confidently and happily to the job. It was good to be out here in this boundless region of wide distances—out where every element of existence must be developed or shaped with their own hands. For this was grim reality—the desert—where only the fit could survive. So Bain and Andy, working together, caught the exhilarating spirit that comes to those who combat with world-old forces—with those who sweat and toil for the real love of work itself—and their blood tingled.

No doubt old Bird Weaver would have been forgotten entirely, had the eccentric

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old neighbor remained on his own side of the coulee. But he did not so remain. It was still an hour till noon, and the boys were marking off the corners to begin the laying of the foundation for the shanty, when muffled hoofbeats were heard on the sandy ground. A moment later, the slouched hat, the shaggy beard, the tattered shirt and corduroys, and the lop-eared mule of the desert patriarch hove in view.

"Why can't that old Arab leave us alone?" muttered Bain. "I s'pose he will tell us we're building this shanty on his land. Next thing he will annex the whole Blistered Rock claim."

"You leave him to me," Andy demanded, smiling confidently.

"You can have him—and welcome," Bain agreed quite readily.

The two kept busily at their work, till a twanging voice called in raucous salutation. "How-dee! How-de-e-e!"

"Good morning, Mr. Weaver!" Andy responded cheerily. "How is everything on your side of the coulee?"

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Old Bird sat for awhile, his keen little eyes blinking rapidly. Evidently he was considering this last query.

“Which side o’ the coulee do you call my side?” he wanted to know.

“I’m not just straight as to directions,” Andy said; “but the side I am talking about is the side from which you have just come.” He made a gesture that took in all of the juniper-grown country beyond the ravine.

“I’ll show you your corners, if that’s what you’re drivin’ at,” old Bird volunteered. He beckoned a lean hand as if to lead off at once.

Noting Andy’s discomfiture, Bain had to bite his lips to keep from laughing.

“No, I don’t care to see them now—am too busy,” declined the good-natured Andy. “Anyway, I’ve seen them. The land agent showed the corners to father and me when we were out here last fall.”

“N-o, he didn’t!” Old Bird Weaver shook his gray locks. “That land sharp played you and your dad a mean trick. He showed you a township corner, and not

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a section line. The corner that marks the location of the spring is covered over with sand. I know where it is, for I've seen it. I've lived here a long time."

Andy had no inclination to begin a discussion of section corners and township lines with their neighbor, so he bluntly changed the subject. "Bain and I have started a new shanty."

"I suspicioned you were doin' that very thing," drawled old Bird.

Both youths wondered what the patriarch's "suspensions" were directed against this time.

"Yep, I suspicioned as much when I saw you tearin' down the old shack and begin totin' the stuff over here." He shook his head dubiously while he critically eyed what had been done.

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CHAPTER THREE.

DON'T you think this is a suitable place to build it?" questioned Andy.

"No, I don't," old Bird answered frankly. "This ain't no suitable place for a shanty at all. You'd better left it where it was."

"That dirty, wind-battered shack was impossible," the younger brother explained. "It was too far from the spring, and on a sand knoll—right out in the burning sun—"

"Which was just the place for it," interjected the neighbor. "I know what I'm talking about. I've lived here a long time."

The two brothers gazed into the grizzled countenance of old Bird with expressions of doubt and uncertainty. "What's wrong with this location?" Andy wanted to know.

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“It ain’t safe,” the patriarch replied.

The newcomers were not convinced. They exchanged sly glances, and between them passed a look of mutual understanding, also of agreement.

“Nope, it ain’t safe!” repeated old Bird, but the declaration fell on deaf ears. When Andy and Bain looked up again, the old man and the gray mule were gone. To Bain’s query as to what Andy thought about it, the younger brother replied:

“I think exactly what I thought before—this peculiar neighbor of ours, though blessed with a ripe old age, and deserving of our consideration, is rather a queer ‘Bird.’ ”

“But what do you think of this site as a safe, sane and suitable location for a shanty?” Bain wanted to know.

“It suits me,” said the younger brother.

“And me, too,” spoke Bain, with equal satisfaction. “Some men might live on the desert a thousand years, and still not learn it all.”

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“You’re a wise philosopher, big brother,” smiled Andy. “Some day, if you live here long enough, you’ll be as wise—well, as wonderfully wise—as our mutual friend—”

Andy let it go unfinished. Bain had seized a juniper stick and raised it threateningly. They returned to their work in a better mood—and with no change of plans. Before the long day ended, the shanty began to take form. Not again that day, nor for many days, did old Bird bother the busy newcomers with his “suspicions.” Several times he rode the lop-eared mule as far as the opposite rim of the coulee, where he sat in the saddle and watched operations from afar.

Came the day when the new domicile for the owners of the Blistered Rock was as completely finished as the supply of available materials would allow. True enough, it wasn’t much of a house, as houses go, but it was a house—a real shanty, with two fair-sized rooms, in which to cook and eat and sleep. Crude as it was, Andy and Bain were proud of

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it. They had built it with their own hands. It was all their own. And they beamed upon it with eyes of satisfaction. They promptly moved their stuff into it—the little kitchen stove, the folding table, the two cots, the few pieces of furniture, and their cooking-duffle.

The rebuilding of the pole stable, repairing of fences, cutting new juniper posts, clearing additional land, offered no end of work for them. They were anxious to have much of this done by the time their father made his visit of inspection late that fall. With the passing of the days, the spirit of the desert took a firmer grip upon them. They had learned to look upon this boundless country as a region of gold by day, a fairyland by night. They were awed by its mystery, and enchanted at times by its fascinating colors. Sitting in the front door of the shanty close under the sand ridge, they had a broad survey of the desert. Looking across the coulee, they could see the weathered little shack of old Bird Weaver on the knoll among the junipers. On

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beyond spread the wide, wide region of yellow sand, gray sage and purple flats, to where the Sawtoothed Range lifted its ragged backbone against the horizon. Out there, on that vast, level floor, other human beings, hardy and hopeful, were digging and building, fencing and claiming, making ready for that glad day when "the Government water would come," and with its coming turn the arid acres into productive fields.

One dull, gray day—a strangely gray day for the desert—Bain and Andy sat in their door and looked out across their barren world with eyes of contemplation. They had finished their noonday meal, and were resting. For some peculiar reason, they both felt tired and uneasy. It might have been the dull, gray day. Indeed, nothing is more depressing than a dull, gray day on the desert.

Bain cast a glance toward the leaden sky. "What do you think of it, Andy?" he queried. "This weather, I mean."

The weather had been of such unbroken monotony since their coming to

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the Blistered Rock that it had never before offered itself as a fit topic for conversation.

“Feels as if we might have a ‘quake,’ ” observed the younger brother. “There’s something sort of squeamish in the atmosphere. Good old sunshine is about the only thing that fits out here.” He got up and went back into the kitchen to get busy with the tin dishes. He felt better when at work. Bain soon joined him.

Awhile later, they heard a muffled thumping of hoofs on the sandy yard. Both listened a moment, then exchanged glances of mutual understanding. “More suspicions!” smiled Andy.

“I’ll do the honors this time,” Bain volunteered, as he dropped the dishrag and hurried to the door.

“How-dee! How-dee-e-e!” sang a voice in a familiar twang as Bain looked out. The lop-eared gray mule stood near the shanty step. Old Bird Weaver sat in the saddle.

“Hello, Mr. Weaver!” greeted Bain. “Won’t you tie up and come in?”

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“Nope! I can’t stop! Must be gettin’ back soon.” The keen gray eyes were cocked skyward. “I suspicion we’re goin’ to have some weather.”

A similar “suspicion” had filtered into the uneasy minds of the Stevens brothers. The disturbing element with them was their inability to guess what sort of weather was forthcoming.

“It does look that way,” Bain agreed. The sun was completely obscured now by that thickening veil of leaden gray. The wind rose in fitful gusts, lifting the sand in little clouds above the floor of the desert.

“Yep, we shore are a-goin’ to have some weather!” old Bird repeated soberly, as he gave his hoary head an ominous shake. He urged the mule closer, and, leaning over, gave Bain a penetrating gaze.

“There’s a-goin’ to be some weather,” the patriarch repeated again. “I know the signs. I’ve lived here a long time. I notice you have your mules in the pole stables, which is good. My advice is for



Came the shrieking blast that threatened to uplift and blow the tiny
house away

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you boys not to leave this shanty the rest o' the day."

The mule was reined about, and urged into a jog-trot. Bain and Andy, speechless, remained on the shanty step. The wind had stiffened. More dust clouds lifted. The eastern horizon had turned black as ink. And out of this somber wall came a deep-toned, guttural note of thunder.

The two boys rushed inside, and shut the door. Almost as quickly came a shrieking blast that threatened for an instant to uplift and blow the tiny house away. The Blistered Rock was at once enveloped in a blinding, swirling cloud of flying sand. Darkness came, though it was several hours till night.

Andy attempted to speak, but had to raised his voice to a yell in order to be heard above the howling and shrieking of the gale. "I suspicion we're going to have some weather."

"Looks to me as if we're having it right now," responded Bain.

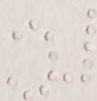


CHAPTER FOUR.

ANDY made another attempt to look through the window. He could as easily have seen through a thunder-cloud. He turned to his brother with an expression of growing fear. "Old Bird may have been right, after all," he remarked soberly. "Possibly we did make a mistake in the location of this shanty."

Bain made a grim attempt to smile. "I suspicion as much," he quoted. "Old Bird ought to know a few things about this desert country."

"He has lived here a long time," chimed in Andy. The two laughed then, and felt better. Still the storm beat down in merciless fury upon the little house. Now and then a wailing gust threatened to lift and hurl it from its foundation. The roof, the walls, every crack and crevice leaked sand like a sieve.



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“Ugh! This is fierce!” sputtered Andy, as he dumped a load of fine grit from his hat, and shook more of it from his clothes.

“I’m afraid the whole sand ridge is moving down on top of us,” Bain spoke fearfully.

“It can’t be that bad,” gasped the younger brother.

It became so dark that Bain lighted a lantern. Creaking, groaning, quivering, the shanty lifted at one corner as if it would take wings.

“If this shack flies, we’ll go with it!” spoke Bain, grimly, as he set the lantern on the table.

After a few uncertain moments, the little house dropped back into place. Then came a peculiar silence. At first the imprisoned youths took this to mean the passing, or the near passing, of the desert gale. But it was still dark—even darker than before.

Bain went to the door, raised the latch, and started to open it. Instantly there poured in an avalanche of sand. Bain

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quickly hurled his weight against the door, and yelled frantically: "Help me, Andy—help me—or we'll be buried alive!"

Their combined efforts were required to get the door closed. It was as if some mighty hand was pushing against it from the outside.

"I won't try that trick again!" muttered Bain, when the latch had been securely fastened. "The hurricane is still howling, Andy—just as fierce as ever."

"I suspicioned as much," smiled Andy, as if determined to make the best of the situation.

And the situation was anything but pleasant. The youths realized now that the shanty was actually being buried in the sand. How deeply it would be buried before the desert storm passed was a matter for conjecture. Neither would venture a guess. They could only wait and hope. To attempt to get out, or to make their escape while the hurricane was on, would mean certain death.

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It was the waiting that finally got on the nerves of the imprisoned pair. Inactivity was not a part of their active creed. This thing of being helplessly confined within the narrow limits of the little, two-room shanty was the worst form of torture. They began walking round and round, aimlessly pausing now and then to listen. The silence grew. The hurricane seemed a long ways off, manifesting itself only in distant rumbling and moaning. Finally even these sounds died out.

"I believe it's over," spoke the older brother, in a voice of hope.

"'Over' is right!" Andy agreed. "It's all over this shanty—the sand, I mean! We'll have to do as the prairie-dogs do—burrow our way out."

They were afraid to attempt egress by the door or window, for to open either would admit a choking avalanche of sand.

"How deep do you s'pose we're buried?" Bain speculated, as he took the lantern from the table.

"I'm a poor guesser," confessed the younger brother, hopelessly. "If we had

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an ax, we might cut a hole in the roof. We'd soon know whether the whole sand ridge is on top of us."

But they had no ax, no tool of any sort inside the shanty, with which they could cut or dig. Now that the hurricane had passed, their restlessness grew. They wanted to get out of the buried shanty. Moreover, they were determined to get out. Both were certain that the sand was piled as high as the eaves of the shanty. Possibly the little house was buried completely. Anyhow, their only chance of escape was through the roof.

"I believe I can cut a hole in the tin with my knife," said Bain.

"But you can't cut the sheeting—not unless you take a long time for the job," declared Andy.

"I'd rather be cutting our way out with a jackknife than doing nothing," spoke Bain, with growing restlessness.

The rooms were not ceiled, and to reach the comb of the roof, at its highest point, the prisoners dragged the table to the center of the front room, and

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stacked a pair of packing-boxes and a trunk on top. Bain made ready to climb to the crest of this makeshift scaffolding, when a sound, from afar off, was heard.

The prisoners stood listening. They feared at first the hurricane was rising again. While they listened, they caught the sound more distinctly. It was some one calling—shouting down the stovepipe!

“It’s old Bird—good old Bird!” exclaimed Andy, as he thumped Bain on the back. No sound, no music, could have been sweeter to the imprisoned youths just then than the twanging voice of old Bird Weaver.

Andy ran to the stove, and jerked off the lids. Putting his face near the base of the pipe, he yelled excitedly: “Hoo-ra-a! Hoo-ra-a! The gang’s all here!”

“I suspicioned you’d all be safe,” came the glad response of the patriarch. “An’ I’m a-goin’ to help you git out. Do you hear—I’m a-goin’ to help you—”

“Sure! Sure!” Andy yelled. “Just tell us how, will you? We’re ready to make our exit at any time.”

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“I’ll drop an ax down the pipe,” directed old Bird from aloft. “You cut a hole in the roof—right in the middle. I’ll clear away the sand up here!”

The ax came clattering down the pipe. Andy seized it eagerly.

“Let me have it!” Bain demanded. “I was all ready to climb up.”

Andy gave it up reluctantly, supporting the shaky scaffolding while Bain clambered aloft. In a moment the older brother was up under the rafters and was striking viciously at the wood and tin.

“I’ll spare you—when you get tired,” volunteered Andy.

But Bain did not stop till he had a jagged hole cut in the roof. On first being opened, it let in a flood of sand. When this quit pouring, there came a widening beam of light and a peep of blue sky—came also a draft of clean, pure air.

“Say, big brother, but that does taste good!” Andy, holding to the stack of boxes, inhaled deeply.

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The bony hands and the long arms of old Bird Weaver came in through the opening. But neither Bain nor Andy saw they were rough and calloused. They saw only, and they knew for a truth, that they were neighborly, helpful hands, extended to them in time of need.

“Come up, you two—I’ll help you through—one at a time,” twanged the voice of the patriarch.

“You first, Andy,” directed the older brother, climbing down. “I want to catch my breath.”

So, by the help of old Bird Weaver, they climbed out of the buried shanty, and the two stood for awhile, dazed by the blinding glare of the late afternoon sun. The storm had gone on, and the desert floor lay as clean as if a gigantic broom had been used upon it.

Old Bird Weaver was talking—and pointing toward the rim of the coulee. “That’s your corner—or one of them—right where I said it was. The storm uncovered it. There’s a pile of lava stones markin’ the spot.”



By the help of old Bird Weaver they climbed out of the buried shanty

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Bain and Andy, shading their eyes, looked over that way—and they saw that the old man spoke the truth. The realization came to them that old Bird had spoken the truth before—the spring was not on the Blistered Rock claim.

“It’s jus’ as I tole you,” the twanging voice went on, not unkindly, not accusingly, but as if stating an unalterable truth. “The spring is on my claim. But I don’t need it, an’ you boys can keep right on usin’ it. This shanty, too, ought not ha’ been built under the sand ridge.”

“You’re right, Mr. Weaver—exactly right!” brought in Bain in big-hearted agreement. “You were right when you warned us, and we should have listened. We will have to rebuild the shanty, and next time we will place it where it should be. We want your advice in getting this old Blistered Rock reclaimed. For we intend to stay here—”

“I suspicioned as much,” chimed in old Bird, happily. “An’ I’m glad to hear it. I’m satisfied you folks will make mighty good neighbors.”

THE GOLD FROM PINE RIDGE

WHEN Dunk raised up for a moment, to rest his back, he discovered old Fiddlin' Bill standing near by. Fiddlin' Bill had not come up the slope from the warm shanty to help him shovel snow from the trail. Dunk was sure of that. But the boy was quick to note that the old man held a steady gaze on the gulch road, as if keenly interested in something.

Dunk looked down and saw a lone horseman strike out from Pine Ridge mining camp in the direction of Boulder, the nearest railway town. The boy knew that big, black horse, even from this distance. And he knew the heavily cloaked, erect figure in the saddle. Nero, the big black, and Jud Macklin, the boss of Pine Ridge mine, were familiar objects to the roustabout. Whither they were bound,

THE GOLD FROM PINE RIDGE

and what urgent business would take them out over the snow-piled road, were matters that Dunk gave no time to consider. He felt a bit concerned, however, as he returned to his shoveling, when he heard old Fiddlin' Bill remark:

"There goes the boss, an' it's a ten-to-one guess with me that he's takin' out a bag o' gold. It's close to clean-up time, so I heard a digger say yesterday. Them diggers are a bunch o' fools, anyhow. Here they are, workin' their arms off an' their hearts out just to make more money for rich men like Jud Macklin. Now, if I had my way, I'd have every digger on the job make a strike for twice the pay he gets now, and cash in on some o' the gold they're diggin' for rich gents like Jud—"

Old Fiddlin' Bill rambled on with more such talk, but Dunk Blevins turned a deaf ear. For one thing, Dunk was busy. He was on a job—a job that big Jud Macklin, the mine boss, had given him. What was more, he liked big Jud—liked him in spite of the contrary talk

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of the trouble-making Bill. "Jud Macklin has played square with me," declared the boy. "He gave me a job, and he pays me good money—"

"Yes, he gave you a job, an' you take the pay he gives you—which is less than half what you might have," sneered Fiddlin' Bill. "It's fools like you, and them diggers down in the mine, that keeps a lot of us poor and a few favored ones rich. Bah! Go on with your fine talk o' the boss! Lean to your shovel, if you've no better sense!" Growling and muttering, as was his way, Fiddlin' Bill, the trouble-maker, turned down the slope toward the shanty, while Dunk Blevins kept on with his job of shoveling snow from the upper trail. Dunk had promised the boss that morning he would have the path clear by the time of the noonday whistle, and he meant to keep his word.

Nearly an hour later he straightened up again. The hard work had brought the perspiration, in spite of the fact that it was December, and snow lay deep on the

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California Siskiyou. But the wind that whispered through the tall pines brought with it a balmy suggestion of smiling valleys where orange groves blossomed in the sunshine. And the warmth of it might have made Dunk Blevins homesick only for the belief that in Pine Ridge and in Jud Macklin he had found the place and the man that would give him his needed chance. Just as he leaned again to his shovel, an object, moving along the gulch road, caught his eye. He raised up, shaded his face and gazed below. A big, black horse with a heavily cloaked figure in the saddle cantered in the direction of camp.

“It’s Nero—and big Jud,” said Dunk to himself. Then he smiled as he recalled the remark of Fiddlin’ Bill a short while before. For Fiddlin’ Bill had guessed wrong. The boss could not have been on his way to Boulder, with a bag of gold, as such a trip would have taken the whole day.

Dunk went on with his work, and did not ease up again till nearly noon. Then

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he made his way down the slope to the shanty of Fiddlin' Bill. The boy returned early, because he knew it would be his place to bring in more pitch pine and fir bark to cook the meal. This day, as always before, he felt a loathing for the shanty and for the man who owned it. True enough, Fiddlin' Bill had taken him in and given him shelter—but Fiddlin' Bill, the trouble-maker, whom Dunk had learned was secretly trying to organize a Bolshevik "order of Reds" in the mining camp, was not the sort the boy wanted to mix with.

When Dunk had reached the road and started across toward the cabin, he saw Fiddlin' Bill shamble out and wave an urging hand. Evidently the fire had burned low and the wood was gone. Dunk did not hurry. He slowed his pace, debating with himself whether to go on or to turn toward the main camp. He was thinking of big Jud, the boss—of the man who had given him a job, who had faith in him, and whom he wanted to please. Truly, big Jud could not hold great confidence or trust in one who associated with

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such trouble-makers as Fiddlin' Bill. Dunk might have turned his face toward the camp—turned his back upon Fiddlin' Bill and the loathsome shanty, only that his eye, just then, was attracted by something that lay half covered in the snow near his feet. He drew closer, and, stooping, reached to pick it up.

He uttered a low cry of amazement when his fingers clutched a canvas bag. And when Dunk Blevins lifted it he knew by its weight that the bag contained gold—many pounds of rich, heavy gold! As he held it in his trembling hands, wondering and silent, he heard muffled footfalls from the direction of the shanty. Turning, he saw Fiddlin' Bill approaching. A sinister smile came quickly to the grizzled face of the old trouble-maker—and he soon guessed the truth. "You've struck it, kid!" he remarked suggestively. "You've got the stuff that will keep both of us on Easy Street for a long, long time! Bring it on to the cabin!"

At that same instant, Jud Macklin, the mine boss, was warming his back be-

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fore the fire that crackled and leaped in the fireplace of his office cabin. "I had to give up the trip," he explained to Dixon, the bookkeeper. "The snow didn't bother me, but Nero lost his wind—couldn't hold the pace. The hostler fed him too much barley last night, and he's about foundered this morning. I took the saddle-bags off, and left them on the porch. I wish you'd bring them in, Dixon. Since we can't send out that gold for a few days, we'd better put it in the safe."

The bookkeeper went out, and, returning shortly, laid the saddle-bags on the plank desk. There was a curious, puzzled expression on his face. "Did I understand you to say there was a month's clean-up in these bags?" he remarked quizzically to the manager.

"Yes, that's right," was the reply.

"Well—there must be something wrong. These bags are light as cotton. One side is open!"

The boss whirled round quickly, catching the note of alarm in the voice of

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Dixon. "What's that?" he exclaimed. "Did you say the bags are open?" He crossed the room to the desk, lifting the leather pouches and holding them up. Then he thrust his hand under the flap. The bookkeeper was right; the bags were empty!

"The gold is gone," announced Jud Macklin in low, subdued tones. "Every ounce of it is gone—more than \$20,000!"

"The bags were just as you find them now—when I picked them up—out on the porch—" Dixon made haste to explain, as if fearing suspicion.

"I know," the manager assured confidently. "Nobody stole the gold. At least, nobody stole it from me. It fell out of the bags. These pouches are old, and the seam ripped. You can see what happened. I should not have trusted them with the weight of so much metal." Macklin held up the torn bags for the bookkeeper to see. "The gold fell out on the road. But it may be covered with snow. I must have lost it on my return to camp, or I would have found it as I

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came in. But just how far back I dropped it I don't know."

Jud Macklin's voice now lost its tone of excited alarm. He was the mine boss again, cool, calm, sure of himself. The truth that a whole month's product of the Pine Ridge diggings was somewhere out there on the snow-piled trail did not make him lose his head. "Go tell Simpson to saddle the two roans, and come round to the office," he directed. "I want him to go with me. We must hit the road at once."

Dixon dashed out hurriedly, while the boss again pulled on his heavy overcoat. Within a few minutes Simpson, the foreman, with two roans, was at the door. A few low-toned words passed between the two men, and then they struck down the snow-piled road, holding their mounts to a slow pace. The keen, searching eyes of the boss and the foreman were held on the road. No track or print escaped their notice. It was evident that no rig or team had passed over the road since the boss came in, and this gave hope that the lost gold would be found.

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A short mile out of Pine Ridge, Jud Macklin, who was in the lead, brought his horse to an abrupt halt. A line of tracks, made by human feet, crossed the road. The tracks led from the upper trail to the shanty of Fiddlin' Bill. There were two pairs of footprints—one made by the shoes of a boy—the other by the boots of a man. Directly in the middle of the road the tracks were numerous, much as if the boy and the man had halted and moved about in a close circle.

"What have you found?" asked the foreman, riding up.

"Am just taking a look here," remarked the boss. "I know these tracks well enough; they were made by Fiddlin' Bill and the roustabout—that new boy, Dunk Blevins. Dunk has been at work on the upper trail this morning, and he would have crossed the road a couple of times going and coming—"

"But he wouldn't have made all these prints—just crossin' the road!" declared the foreman. "Why, look down there, man—see the prints—dozens of 'em! And

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here's another mark in the snow. See—it looks as if some object lay there, half buried.” Simpson leaned far over in his saddle and indicated the mark with his gloved hand. “My guess is that the bag of gold dropped right there—in that spot—and if Fiddlin’ Bill, or that new kid, got their fingers on it—”

The foreman hesitated, straightening himself in the saddle and looking toward the shanty.

“We’ll ride over to the cabin,” suggested the boss. “Fiddlin’ Bill and Dunk must be in, as there is a fire burning.”

“We’d better not ride,” cautioned Simpson. “Not toward the shanty, anyhow. They’d hide the stuff if they saw us comin’. My plan is to ride on down the road, and leave our horses in the brush, while we sneak back to the shanty afoot.”

“You don’t seem to place much trust in Fiddlin’ Bill?” remarked the boss.

“You’re right, I don’t,” returned the foreman, decisively. “Nor in that kid either. They’re two of a kind—that pair!”

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After concealing their mounts, the foreman and the boss crept through the snow-laden manzanita bushes to the shanty of Fiddlin' Bill. A short distance from the cabin they came upon the line of tracks again. These indicated that a man and a boy had lately passed that way.

The two halted and exchanged a few cautious words. "Shall we break in on 'em unannounced—or tap on the door?" asked Simpson.

"I think we'd better walk up quietly and listen," answered Jud Macklin. "To be honest with you, Simp, I'm not so sure that the boy Dunk is in on this—in a guilty way, I mean. Somehow I have a lot of confidence in the lad—"

"Yes, but look at the company he keeps," demanded the foreman. "Old Fiddlin' Bill is a trouble-maker, an' the sooner we get him out o' camp, the better will it be for Pine Ridge."

"We should not blame Dunk for being in Fiddlin' Bill's company," said the boss. "Anyhow, it isn't likely the boy will stay with him long."

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“Just the same, if they’ve found that bag o’ gold, I wouldn’t give much for the chance o’ gettin’ it back,” persisted the foreman. “They’re both alike—”

Simpson broke off his talk abruptly, and both men listened silently. The growling voice of Fiddlin’ Bill could be plainly heard, mingled with the thumping of heavy boots on the cabin floor.

“Come on,” whispered the boss, “let’s hurry round to the rear.”

Bending their backs, and stooping, to avoid the low-hanging boughs, they crept on under the firs and reached the back wall of the shanty. Here they halted again, their ears near a chink between the rough logs.

“You’re a crazy young fool!” came the angry voice of Fiddlin’ Bill. “It’s our gold—yours and mine! Didn’t we find it in the road? Why should you take it back?”

“It isn’t ours,” answered a youthful voice that the two men quickly recognized as that of Dunk Blevins. “The boss lost it—”

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"An' he won't miss it!" brought in Bill.

"Yes, he will miss it," declared Dunk. "He must have missed it, or he wouldn't have come back to camp."

"He failed to find it—an' that's his loss, not ours," said Fiddlin' Bill. "Anyhow, he's rich, an' he don't need it. There's plenty more gold in the Pine Ridge mine."

"This gold is not ours—none of it. And I'm going to take this right back to the boss."

The two men, listening at the chink, heard footfalls on the floor. Evidently Dunk had started for the door. But he did not get far. Shortly the voice of Fiddlin' Bill was heard again.

Simpson raised up as if to move round to the front of the shanty, when the boss restrained him. "Wait a minute," whispered Macklin, "I want to hear what old Bill has to say."

"You listen to me, you foolish little brat, an' I'll put some sense in your head," demanded old Bill, sternly. "Yes,

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an' I'll put some money in your pocket. We're goin' to start an order o' the Reds in this camp—an' we need the stuff to get the thing goin'. This will be our chance. The diggers in this mine can just as well get double the pay they're gettin' now. All they need to do is strike. I've talked with a lot of 'em, and a number are ready to join when the thing looks sure. With this stuff I can make it sure. It will be a big go—an' you should be one o' the bunch. Come on—hand it over, an' I'll call in some o' the crowd to celebrate."

A few moments of tense silence followed. The men at the rear wall held their breath, as if waiting for the answer of Dunk Blevins. They guessed that Fiddlin' Bill, too, waited the answer—that Fiddlin' Bill, huge and menacing, stood over the boy that held the bag of gold, as in truth he did.

The boss raised himself erect, his face tensely drawn, his gloved hands tightly clenched. "He's a 'Red' all right—that troubling old Bolshevik!" muttered the boss, angrily.

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“Yes, an’ the kid will likely prove no better,” declared Simpson.

“Sh-h-h! You wait!” demanded Macklin.

Then came the voice of Dunk Blevins, clear and decisive: “Get out of my way, you big growler! If you take me for the sort that will play false with the boss, you’ve made a bad guess. He’s a white man—Jud Macklin is—and I’ll stand by him. This is his gold, and I’m going to take it to him. Stand back, I say! Get out of my way, or I’ll—”

Then came the sound of trampling feet—the deep-toned, guttural voice of Fiddlin’ Bill, the shrill, determined crescendo of Dunk Blevins.

It was Simpson, the foreman, who gave the word to move. “Come on, boss,” he spoke hurriedly. “The kid’s true blue—and we must get inside before that old Bolshevik gets him down!”

They rushed round to the front, and broke in the rough-paneled door. And they were none too soon. For, fast as they had come, Fiddlin’ Bill, in a fit of

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rage, had floored Dunk with a blow from his heavy fist. Dunk, though hurled in a crumpled heap to a corner of the shanty, clung tenaciously to the bag of gold. He was making a vain effort to get up when Simpson and the boss rushed in.

Before the maddened Fiddlin' Bill could administer a second kick with his heavy boot on the prostrate form of the boy, Simpson seized him by the collar and jerked him back. One heavy swing from the foreman's calloused hand sent the trouble-maker sprawling to the far end of the shanty. Then Simpson stooped and tenderly raised Dunk Blevins, pillowing the boy's bruised head on his arms. "We ought of rushed in here sooner," he declared. "For that big brute might have finished you. Anyhow, I know now, Dunk, old man, that you're the real stuff."

"Here's your gold—boss—Mr. Jud—it's all yours—and I would have brought it back!" stammered the boy between breaths, as he held forth the heavy bag for the manager to take.

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“Sure, Dunk—sure!” Jud Macklin said. “It was safe in your hands. As for that old trouble-maker—we’ll see that he’s put where he can do no further harm. And I’ll make room for you down in my quarters. You’re the sort I want for company. Thanks to you, there will be no ‘order of Reds’ in this camp!”

SKOOKUM AND THE BLIZZARD

WHY does Bob Haver give that old, blind horse the best stall in the barn and the best feed his ranch affords?"

Repeating the question whimsically, and casting a side glance in the direction of the lot where a huge, rawboned horse roamed at will, Uncle Dan Frazer, the ranch boss, dropped into a tone of reminiscence. Those of us who knew Uncle Dan understood full well, by his voice and manner, that a tale was coming. The newcomers, who were with us on a visit to the Haver place, followed our lead, and listened.

"Well, gents, I'll tell you why old Skookum, that blind horse out there, is the best treated critter in the country. It's because Bob Haver, his owner and master, thinks a lot of 'im. And let me tell you, Bob has plenty of cause to feel that way."

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Uncle Dan dropped his lank frame to a sitting position on the edge of the step, motioning the rest of us to the rawhide-bottom chairs that were scattered promiscuously on the broad, low-roofed veranda of the rambling house.

“Bob hasn’t always manifested such kindly feelin’s toward old Skookum,” Uncle Dan declared. “A few years ago, when Bob first came into possession of this ranch, he had an interest in a stage-line. Before the days of the motor-car and the motor-truck, hoss-stages were a good thing—mostly. This stage-line between Dufur and Red Oak was one of the real good ones. Old Skookum was a stage-hoss, and a mighty good one. I’ll guess he’s traveled enough miles, back and forth over the Bristleback route, to have taken him several times round the world. Anyhow, he wore himself out at it. Blind as he was, he knew every foot of the road. The stage-drivers used to say that old Skookum could have been turned loose anywhere on the line and he would have made his way, unaided, to the nearest

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relay station. But the best hosses will finally wear out. And the day came when old Skookum made his last trip with the stage. He was turned back to the ranch, and a younger animal put in his place. In the language of the old-time drivers, Skookum was 'relegated to the boneyard.' Poor old critter! He actually seemed to feel the disgrace of havin' to quit. He appeared to know that he had reached his limit—that he could no longer hold the pace for the reg'lar run over the route.

"What made it worse for 'im, young Bob considered the worn-out stager as just so much useless material. He didn't take into account how much old Skookum had earned for him during the years of hard service. Nor did he calkilate that, on the basis of such count, old Skookum deserved a pension. No, Bob was young then, as I've said, and given more to hard-cash figurin'. He actually wanted to turn that faithful old hoss out on the range, to shift a livin' off the bunchgrass. I was foreman here then, as I am now, and I said: 'No, sir-ee! Old Skookum doesn't

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go on the range—not while I'm boss! An' Skookum didn't, though the worn-out stager was restless and uneasy. He would wander away, blind as he was, and meander aimlessly up and down the road. It was almost pitiful. If not doin' that, he would seek a secluded corner, drop his head and mourn. For days at a stretch we didn't see the old hoss, though we heard of him often.

“Winter struck us so quick and hard that November it almost took our breath. It came on with a stiff blow, straight from the north, and the thermometer dropped to the bottom of the tube in quicker time than you could count twenty-three. It caught us with several things to do, or that hadn't been done, and which, because of the blow, had to be done mighty quick. For one thing, there was a small bunch of yearlin's up under the ridge, that had to be made secure in the feedin'-shed. Bob said he would go up and see to 'em. I didn't object, for I had a-plenty to keep me busy. But, busy as I was, I thought of old Skookum, out somewhere in the

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growin' storm—wanderin' aimlessly, blindly about.

“ ‘Say, Bob,’ I called, just as he started out, ‘do you think there’s a chance that Skookum is outside—’ ”

“ ‘Don’t bother me about that old, worn-out skate!’ Bob snapped in return. ‘I haven’t time to think about him.’ ”

“ ‘Before I had a chance to answer, an’ to speak my mind, Bob was gone. That howlin’, dense swirl of blowin’ snow soon enveloped him. Oh, how that gale did blow! It swept over the ridge with the force of a hurricane, shrieking down upon the ranch like a thousand demons. Though I had trouble a-plenty lookin’ after the stray stock near the corrals, it turned out that Bob had a much tougher time. Up on the slope, where the blizzard had an open sweep, he was buffeted and tossed, willy-nilly. Gropin’, feelin’, pushin’ head down, he managed, by goin’ a foot at a time, to finally reach the feedin’-shed under the bluff. Luckily, the yearlin’s were all inside, and there was enough hay stored to last for a month. Bob threw

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down a lot of it into the racks, warmed himself, and started back,

“The trip back proved even more uncertain and difficult than had that to the bluff. The gale had increased, and the cold was more severe. The snow bit like powdered steel at Bob’s exposed cheeks. He could see less than a yard in any direction. He had wisely figgered on just such trouble, and, havin’ found a ball of cord in the feedin’-shed, unwound this as he proceeded. He knew it would at least help him get back to the shed in case he got hopelessly lost, or found himself unable to proceed.

“He had gone less than two hundred yards from the shed when the gale caught him unawares in one of its shrieking gusts, and lifted him off his feet. In his efforts to keep from being blown down the bluff, he reached his mittened hands for something to grasp—and the ball of cord went flying, disappearing at once in the blinding swirl.

“Gasping, struggling, Bob searched awhile for the cord, but could not find it,

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then started on, taking a direction that he believed would bring him out at the ranch gate. With the blizzard buffeting him around, and his whole body benumbed, he soon became hopelessly confused. Had he been dropped into the middle of the Sahara Desert, with a sandstorm blowin' round him, Bob Haver could not have been any more helpless. Whenever he came upon a clump of sagebrush, or a chaparral-bush, he would pull a twig and hold it near his eyes, in a vain attempt to find something familiar. That little distance of a quarter of a mile, between the bluff and the corrals, which any of you could walk right now in five minutes' time, became a stretch of a thousand perils, uncertain and mysterious.

"Realizing that he was lost, and fearful that he might perish before he could get back to the gate, Bob shouted and yelled. I was so busy with my own troubles just then that I didn't hear him. Nor was there any one else within reach of his shouts. In fact, Bob's cries were smothered by the shrieks and howls of

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the blizzard, and went nowhere. Stumblin' and scramblin', he kept movin', knowin' he would certainly freeze if he stood still for any length of time. Every little distance, or every little while, he made a trumpet of his mittened hands and yelled.

"An' finally, as if in response to his call, there appeared from out of the blindin' swirl a gaunt shape, which Bob took at first glance for an apparition. It loomed directly over 'im, and stretched a long neck and quiverin' nose into his face. Bob felt a warm breath against his cheek, and when he took a better look he saw what it was that had come to him.

" 'Skookum! Skookum! Dear old Skookum!' he cried in a glad, muffled voice, as he lifted his arms and clasped them about the lean neck. As if he understood the plight of his young master, and forgetting many things that must have weighed on his heart, the old stager put a quivering nostril to Bob's cheek again and whinnied lowly.

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“ ‘Skookum—old man—I’m lost!’ confessed Bob. ‘I’m lost—and you must show me the way—’

“That blind hoss whinnied again, as if he knew, striking out at once. Bob seized his tail, and hung on with all his strength. He knew full well that, if he let go, his last chance would be gone. ‘Go, Skookum! Go!’ he kept urging, and the blind hoss, his head ducked to the howling gale, led unerringly by that strange sixth sense of his, kept going, going.

“I had finished my work, and, thinkin’ of Bob, started out afoot in the direction of the bluff. I hadn’t gone far when I plumped head-on into old Skookum. He was plowin’ straight for the gate. I seized him by the mane, and gave ’im a hearty slap on the neck. ‘Skookum, old boy,’ I shouted, ‘you’re headed straight for home, all right, all right; but where’s Bob?—’

“ ‘Here I am, Dan—here I am!’ answered Bob from the rear. ‘I’ve got a tail hold on Skookum, and I don’t intend to let go!’

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“Nor did he let go till he was safe inside the corral. Then he stumbled over toward the house, callin’ to me as he went: ‘Say, Dan, put old Skookum in the barn—at once. Give ’im the warmest stall—an’ the best feed. See that he’s taken care of proper. He’s blind—but he can see better than I can—an’ he has more sense in a minute than I have in a week!’”

THE MELTING OF OLD SKEE- ZOOKS

HIS real name was Buck Keezer, but to every boy, and to most grown folks in the Red Hills community, he was known as "Old Skee-zooks." Seldom was the nickname spoken in a tone of kindness. The truth must be told that Buck Keezer, or "Old Skee-zooks," whichever you please, had few friends. Certainly, he had very few among the boys of the neighborhood. And he might have numbered them by the score. For the biggest and best patches of wild strawberries to be found anywhere in the district grew on Buck's ranch. So did the best blackberries and the best hazelnuts. But for any one to trespass upon the sacred and forbidden premises of Buck Keezer was to invite the wrath of the crusty rancher.

"You'd think 'Old Skee-zooks' would have something else than a stone for a

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heart—just for the sake of Billy—now, wouldn't you?" queried Don Medley.

"Stone!" retorted Bob Frazer. "Why credit Buck with having a heart of stone? It's more like an icicle—frozen so hard nothing can melt it."

"Something will happen one of these days to warm it a degree or two," brought in Tom Hooper. "He can't go on and on making himself a sort of kaiser over his domain without suffering for it. Just wait awhile."

Mounted on their skis, the three boys were on their way toward Baldpate, a barren, treeless butte that lifted its domed top beyond the border-line of Buck Keezer's place. The night previous had brought the first good skiing snow of the winter, and the chums wanted to make the best of it. Anticipating just such a day of sport, they had made their skis and ski-poles ready the day before. Billy Keezer, the adopted son of Buck, and who was as much unlike his foster father as any boy could be, had invited the trio to Baldpate. The butte was not a part of

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the rancher's holdings, and the boys feared no trouble from him.

But when they reached the lower gate to the Keezer ranch, where they were given the choice of either crossing a portion of the open pasture or driving down through a deep gulch densely grown to hazel thicket, wild plum and vine maple, the three paused to consider. Smooth and glittering as lay the crusted snow, it had been a hard, up-hill pull all the way from town. By going in through Buck's gate, and taking a short cut across the pasture, they would have an easy route the remaining distance to Baldpate. To wallow down into the deep gulch, through the bushy tangle, would require an extra hour or more of the toughest sort of going.

"Let's take the pasture," Tom suggested. "What's the harm? We can climb over the fence, and not touch the gate. We wouldn't do the least injury to Buck by taking this route."

"He has a trespass notice up just the same," reminded Bob. "Which is reason a-plenty for 'Old Skeezeooks' firing us off."

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“We’ll get across before he has time to come down here,” declared Don, who was already pulling himself over the stone fence. “Billy hinted that we might come this way—and save hard work and time. Come on, fellows! Let’s be wise and make tracks for the other side while the tracking is good.”

In a moment all three were over the fence and following Don’s lead. The broad pasture, a wide spread of glinting white, sloped gently from the ranch-house to the road. The boys hoped, by keeping well down toward the lower border, to reach the opposite corner unobserved. But they had gone less than a hundred yards when the unexpected happened. A man on snow-shoes webbed out from the shadow of a fir grove near the fence, and appeared before them. He was a big man, whose huge boots and heavy mackinaw added to his weight and stature. But more menacing was the scowl that clouded his bronzed face. It required only a glimpse for the youths to see that the man who now loomed

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before them was none other than "Old Skeezooks."

"Turn back, and git out o' here!" ordered Buck. "You are trespassin' on my land. Didn't you see the notice down by the gate?" He waved his heavy stick threateningly.

The three youths were taken completely by surprise. For a moment they stood and stared speechlessly. Don was the first to find his voice. "We meant no harm, Mr. Keezer," he protested. "Billy will be waiting for us, over on Baldpate—and as it is much closer, by taking a short cut across the pasture—"

"It makes no difference!" interjected the unreasoning Buck. "You're trespassin' on my land—an' I don't allow it! Turn back and git out, all of you!"

"It will be mighty tough going, down through the gulch," brought in Tom, in pleading tones. "If you'll let us cross this one time—"

"Turn back and git out, I tell you!" Old Buck advanced a few paces nearer, swinging his stick. "I don't care which

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way you have to go, as long as you're off my land."

Muttering their feelings of indignation, and in anything but a pleasant mood, the three turned back and climbed over the fence. "The old scalawag must have known we were coming, and laid in wait for us," declared Don in a bitter tone.

"Sure he did!" Tom agreed. "Nothing pleases 'Old Skee-zooks' more than the chance to be mean. Billy probably dropped a word or two, which was enough to put him wise to our coming. Chances are he won't let Billy come out to Baldpate at all."

"Shall we go on?" Don had headed toward the gulch, but halted and looked at his companions.

"Sure—we'll go on!" the other two chorused. "We will have our fun, even though Billy can't join us."

"Fancy having to live under the same roof with such an old crust as that!" exclaimed Don. "Life must be anything but a picnic for Billy. Well, here goes!"

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They dived into the bramble-grown, snow-piled hollow. For more than an hour they wallowed and scrambled. They were obliged to unstrap their skis and plunge willy-nilly through the growth. At times they dropped to their necks through the mesh of briars and the drifted snow. There was no path or trail—no open way anywhere. The descent of the gulch wall was bad enough, but the climb out was torment. Whenever they halted, to catch their breath, or to assist one another, they muttered maledictions upon the head of Buck Keezer. Truly, the ears of "Old Skeezeooks" must have burned as he went back to the ranch.

When they finally got through, and reached the open ground beyond the gulch, they were in a sorry plight. Mittens and mackinaws were torn, exposed cheeks scratched and bleeding. Don had ripped one legging from top to bottom; Bob had lost his ski-pole. They were mad enough to have set fire to the whole Keezer ranch. But, mad as they were, they were fully determined to go on,

THE MELTING OF OLD SKEEZOOKS

and make the best of the day's sport. They would return to town by the opposite road and trail, though it meant a long journey round.

Keeping just outside the stone fence, they followed the ranch border-line to a point within a short quarter-mile of the house. Here they would have veered their course over a low ridge, but were brought to a stop by a hoarse cry. Looking over in the direction of the house, they saw Buck Keezer coming toward them. He was waving his arms, and yelling: "Hold on! Hold a minute!"

"He must want us to wait here till he gets near enough to fire us off again," Don remarked.

"He can't fire us," brought in Tom. "We're not on his land."

"I wonder what the old scallawag has on his mind now," mused Bob. "Why should we bother ourselves with him? He was mean enough to order us off his place, and force us down into that bramble-filled, snow-piled gulch. I'm for going on—"

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“No—listen!” demanded Don. “He’s telling us something. There must be trouble of some sort up at the house.”

By this time old Buck had webbed down to within a few yards of the fence. He was near enough for the boys to detect the change that had come upon his weather-bronzed face. The scowl was replaced with a look of alarm and anxiety. “Billy is badly hurt!” he spoke hoarsely. “Cut his foot with an ax—is bleeding awful—must have help quick. I’m wonderin’ if you boys—”

“Sure!” responded the three in chorus. “This way, fellows,” called Don, as he bounded over the fence. “We must help Billy.” Whatever ill feelings they held against “Old Skeezooks” were forgotten in their united desire to help the rancher’s adopted son. For they knew Billy to be true blue.

With all the speed possible, and limited only by their endurance and ability, they made the ascent of the slope. Old Buck, wheezing and gasping, followed well in the rear. He was still far behind

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when the three boys went in through the gate. A white-faced woman beckoned to them from the porch. Slinging off their skis at the step, the boys went in, and were directed to a cot in the living-room, where a big fire burned in the deep fireplace. Billy lay on the cot, his injured foot extended and bleeding profusely, even through the mass of bandage that had been hurriedly and unskillfully wrapped around it.

“Cloth—water—everything for a tourniquet, fellows!” Don directed in a calm voice, as he jerked off his sweater and rolled up his sleeves. His companions did likewise. Then he spoke to Billy: “Lie easy, old man—easy. We’ll soon fix this hurt.”

It proved a bad cut—a deep gash opened by the sharp blade of the ax, which severed an artery on the ball of the foot. And it was well for Billy Keezer that these three youths who had rushed to the rescue were trained in first aid. Mrs. Keezer could do little more than rush around aimlessly, wringing her

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hands. Old Buck himself was of little better service. By the time the rancher came in, puffing and blowing, Don and his capable helpers had the flow of blood staunched, and were dressing the wound preparatory to applying a bandage.

"We must get a doctor—get a doctor!" gasped Buck.

"It is a case for a doctor—and a good one," Don agreed. "This tourniquet will hold for a time, but ought to be removed as soon as possible. I think the better way would be for us to carry Billy down the slope to the main road, where a rig can reach him. That will be much quicker than getting a doctor up here." He was looking at his companions as he spoke. All nodded agreement.

"How can you take him down?" old Buck asked dubiously.

"Leave the job to us; we'll manage it," assured Don. "Eh, Billy?"

"You fellows are good enough doctors for me," smiled the injured one.

"We want a strip of wide, strong canvas, or a blanket, with which to make a

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stretcher," Don said to Mrs. Keezer. "Then other warm blankets for covering. Tom and Bob will get stretcher-poles."

For the first time in all their experience, the boys saw a smile on the face of old Buck. He tramped out with Bob and Tom, showing the way to the woodshed. Old Buck was still smiling and mumbling words of gratitude when the three capable youths, mounted on their skis, and carefully bearing the stretcher on which the injured Billy lay, started down the slope.

"This way, lads—this way," directed the rancher, pointing in the direction of the lower gate. It was the same way over which old Buck had forbidden the three boys to pass only a short time before.

"This route is open to you boys now," smiled Buck, his voice sounding a strange note of mingled apology and gratitude. "From now on, you can cross this pasture as often as you please. I never knew that boys could be so handy."

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So the pasture route was followed to the main road, where a rig was called and carried Billy the remaining distance to the doctor's office. Though Don, Bob and Tom were denied their sport on Baldpate for that day, there were other days coming when they got a full measure of frolic and fun—days, too, in other seasons, when the strawberry patches, the hazel thickets and the melon-field are opened to them freely. Now, when the boys speak the nickname of Buck Keezer, they give it with a far different meaning and tone, "Good old Skeezeooks!"

THE BUCKSKIN COAT

CHAPTER ONE.

THEY clinched. They fought madly back and forth in the cabin of Jude Kiger. They broke down the bunk, and trampled it underfoot. They upset the table, and scattered the tin dishes over the plank floor. Finally, in a desperate struggle, the two youths, close-locked, rolled across the hearth into the fireplace, which, luckily, contained nothing but dead coals, ashes and a greasy frying-pan.

Hoxie Morris, the youthful deputy sheriff, seized the frying-pan and settled the dark-skinned half-breed. Then he got weakly to his feet, panting like a fagged dog, and sank exhausted on a cracker-box, the one piece of furniture in the cabin that had not been wrecked during the fracas. Here he got his wind,

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and waited Jude Kiger's return to consciousness.

Before a great while, Jude rose awkwardly, and, leaning against the rough mantelpiece, glared at the young deputy through swollen eyes. "I want my coat!" he demanded. "You've got my buckskin coat!"

"Yes, I have a buckskin coat here," remarked Hoxie, holding up a limp, leather garment, considerably worn, but which, in spite of its age, still looked gaudy in its many tassels and beads. "I stripped this coat off your back early in our little mix-up," the deputy added. "This is the first time I have ever seen you that you did not have it on."

"Gimme my coat!" the half-breed again demanded, most insistently. When he reached for the buckskin garment, Hoxie jerked it away.

"You keep your boots on," Hoxie advised. "I have not gone to all this trouble of getting the coat merely to return it to you. Nor am I sure the coat is your property."

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“Do you call me a thief?” Jude bel-
lowed, bending forward menacingly, as if
he would pounce upon the young deputy
again.

“No, I’m not calling you a thief,”
answered Hoxie, calmly. “I merely
said I have very good reason to believe
that this buckskin coat does not belong
to you. That was why I came over to
get it. As an officer of the law, sworn
to do my duty, I demanded it of you
kindly. When you refused to let me
have it, I proceeded to take it by force.
I will now convey it to the one to whom
I think it rightfully belongs—”

“Aw—you can’t bluff me!” Jude
Kiger exclaimed. “It’s my coat. It
was given to me a long time ago—and
I intend to keep it. Anyhow, what value
is it to you—or to anybody else?”

Jude’s questions were a plain chal-
lenge. Nor was the deputy slow in
making a response. Straightway he
turned the coat wrong side out, spreading
the inner lining across his knees. “This
is what I know about it,” he remarked.

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“This peculiar design worked into this lining is a map. That long, crooked mark, made with silk thread, is a river, and this other one, connecting with it, is a creek. That ornamental line, made with beads, represents a mountain range. This circle, near the center, shows the location of an old-time placer diggings, and the dot near by is a reservoir—a broken sluice connects it with—”

“Who told you all that?” bellowed the half-breed again, making another reach for the coat, but again finding it jerked beyond his grasp.

“Listen to me a minute, Jude Kiger,” demanded Hoxie, sternly, as he thrust a finger close to the half-breed’s glaring eyes. “Let’s talk like a pair of rational human beings. I have this coat now, and, as an officer, I can hold it till its ownership is properly proved. Also, as you now realize, I do know something about it. I know why you have guarded it so carefully—wearing it day and night, and never letting its inner lining be seen by any eyes other than your own. A lot of



“Who told you all that?” bellowed the half-breed

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folks have wondered why you never allowed yourself to be separated from this old garment, and not till a few days ago did I find out—”

“Who told you about it?” Jude wanted to know.

“I’ll tell you straight—and without any quibbling,” returned Hoxie. “It was Kutch Cober.”

“What! You don’t mean that little, crippled shrimp—”

“I mean that fine boy with the crooked foot,” said the young deputy. “Though he is a cripple, he is 100 per cent. pure, and during the few days that he has been in this town I’ve learned—”

“That kid has been stuffin’ you!” exclaimed the half-breed.

“That’s a matter for me to determine—or to pass upon,” said Hoxie. “Anyhow, the information he has given me has a peculiar way of proving itself. And, to settle this question of who owns the buckskin coat, we are going at once to see Kutch Cober.” The deputy started toward the door.

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"Hold a second," demanded Jude. "Mebbe that kid does know something about this old rag. But, before we go over and have this confab with 'im, I want to know what's your lay. Does he know the country marked by this map? And if he goes to find the stuff—"

"What do you mean by the stuff?" Hoxie cut in.

"The lost gold, of course," Jude answered.

The deputy smiled. "If you will promise to keep rational, we'll talk those matters over with Kutch Cober," Hoxie replied, leading the way out.

Across the mining town, sheltered by a grove of laurels they found the cabin of Gus Mason. Old Gus was a drill-sharpener, and worked in the mines during the day shift. He was on duty, so Kutch, who kept care of the shanty, was alone.

The crippled youth was seated on the edge of a bunk, reading a book, when the two callers entered. He dropped the book, and, half raising himself, met

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with unflinching gaze the menacing, wicked stare of the half-breed. There were no introductions. Evidently, Jude Kiger and Kutch Cober had met before. Kutch threw a keen, satisfying glance in the direction of Hoxie, taking quick note of the buckskin coat the deputy carried. Then he began to talk.

“I’ve been all over Nevada and a good portion of California, trying to get you located, Jude Kiger,” informed the crippled boy. “Traveling is slow with me—and mighty hard—especially since I got that bad fall on the Feather River dredge. As you may guess, it is this buckskin coat I’ve wanted. But not till I arrived in this camp did I find any one who would listen to my story or give me any help. This one is Hoxie Morris, the sheriff’s son. He is true blue, all right, and—”

“Never mind the eulogy stuff now, Kutch,” said Hoxie, good-naturedly.

“Well, as you know, Jude, this coat belonged to my father,” Kutch resumed. “He was the one who worked the peculiar

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map into the lining. It represents an old diggings that he and your dad worked in the days before you and I were born. Seems as if the two made a rich strike in those particular diggings; but about the time they had all the gold cleaned from the sluices, they were driven out by an attacking horde of savages. They made their escape, after caching the gold, but were never able to return. My father made a map of the diggings as he remembered, and while the details of the place were still fresh in his mind. This map was worked into the inner lining of his buckskin coat. Later on, he entrusted this coat to your father, who had married an Indian woman. He never saw the coat again, though he told me about it when I was old enough to understand—describing it so well that I knew I would recognize it the moment I saw it. And the first day I glimpsed you, down in Feather River—”

“What’s all this ancient history got to do with the question of who owns the coat?” Jude demanded impatiently. “If

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my dad gave it to me, I can't see but that it's mine, or as much mine as anybody's. And, since nobody knows anything about what this old coat means—where the old diggings are—or anything about the country where our dads worked as pardners, I can't see but that the coat had just as well belong to me as to any one."

"There happens to be a person who does know about those old diggings," informed Kutch. As the cripple spoke he turned his gaze toward Hoxie.

Quick understanding came to Jude Kiger. He, too, looked in the deputy's direction. "Then it's you, is it, who knows about the old diggings?" he asked skeptically. "Tell us what you know, an' be quick about it."

"Keep your boots on," Hoxie advised again. "I said we would talk this thing over rationally. I happen to know something about this affair, but before I make any revelation, and to protect the interests of all concerned, I want to make definite terms. If it should happen, after a search is made, in which the three of us

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engage, that the gold is found, how much of the treasure would you claim?"

"Half of it!" answered Jude, with greedy promptness.

"Then we won't find it," answered the deputy. "There will be three of us in on this deal, and if you will allow me to be plain, Jude Kiger, it is only our desire to be more than fair that we let you in at all. If the thing was put to a test, it is doubtful if you could prove any claim to the coat. But Kutch himself has asked that you be let in on the division of the gold if any gold is found, share and share alike."

"Well, all right," the half-breed youth agreed reluctantly. "A three-thirds cut goes. But first tell me what you know about this map—or about the old diggin's."

Hoxie spread the old coat on his knees again, inside out, revealing the faded lines of the peculiar chart. "This line here is Klamath River," he said, pointing it out. "This other smaller line is Thompson Creek. This mountain range is the

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Siskiyou—all on the California side of the divide. I know, because I've been over there. It happened that I was up there, with my father, looking for a gang of sluice thieves, and one day, while thirsty and wanting water, I heard a spring trickling through the growth. I got off my horse and crawled in to get a drink. When I raised up and looked round I saw I was inside an old stone reservoir—an old miner's reservoir, built years and years ago. We knew, then, it was a site of an old diggings—"

"Sure! Sure!" shouted Jude Kiger, in sudden enthusiasm. "You found it all right. Dad would never tell me anything about it; but I did hear him say somethin' once about it's being in the Siskiyou. Let's hit the trail at once."

Now that the mystery of the faded chart in the lining of the buckskin coat had been revealed—or explained—Jude Kiger was impatient to complete the unraveling of the tangle. He did not want to wait till Hoxie made final arrangements, and planned the details of the pro-

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posed treasure hunt with the cripple. He was out of the shanty and gone while Hoxie and Kutch were still talking the matter over.

“It will pay us to keep an eye on that dark-skinned individual,” Kutch remarked cautiously, throwing a glance in the direction of the door.

“It isn’t necessary for you to tell me that,” the young deputy answered. “I know his sort—and I don’t intend to be overlax with him. We’re going to play this game fair, Kutch, you can depend on that.”

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CHAPTER TWO.

BEFORE sunrise that October morning, the three treasure-hunters struck the high trails for the Siskiyous. Their outfit consisted of one cayuse to carry the pack, and another for the crippled Kutch to ride. Hoxie and Jude walked. It was a two days' uneventful trip to the first high peaks. Though the trail still proved fair going for the cayuses, something happened on the third night that put both ponies out of business, for a time at least.

On the fourth morning the pair of hardy little beasts were not able to rise. Evidently both had eaten something, while tethered, that poisoned them.

"Mountain loco weed," spoke Jude Kiger, knowingly. "There's quite a bit of the stuff up here. It will be four or five days—mebbe longer—before these critters can take the trail."

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"That will be a long time to wait," said Hoxie, in a tone of impatience.

"Sure, it's a long time to wait," Jude promptly agreed. Then he suggested: "I don't see that there's any use of all of us waitin' here that long. According to the lay-out you've made we're not more than a day's hike from the head of Thompson Creek. Why not let Kutch stay here with the ponies, while you and I go on? If we find the stuff, we'll come back this way, and make the divvy just the same. If the ponies get well in a day or so, Kutch can come on and find us. He won't have much trouble following our trail."

With this suggestion from Jude, Hoxie and Kutch exchanged questioning glances. Each was thinking of the word of caution that passed between them before leaving the lower camp. Yet there seemed nothing in this proposal of the half-breed to arouse suspicion.

"Go ahead, Hoxie," the crippled youth urged. "I'll stay here with the cayuses. We may save valuable time by

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your going on at once. Anyhow, I may be able to follow in a day or so."

That settled it. The outfit was re-divided and newly distributed. Hoxie and Jude, loaded with all they could easily carry, resumed the upward climb of the mountain trail. The going was hard. For long, wearisome stretches they stumbled over boulders of a creek-bed, where the benches and bars were stripped of bed-rock. For they were now in the early diggings region. The crumbling sluices and broken conduits gave mute evidence of a time when the hard Argonauts of the long ago swarmed the district and cradled the gold from the rich gravel.

The way grew steeper and more rugged. Though late October, the California sun burned hot upon their backs, and the two youths sweltered under their galling burdens. Night found them on Thompson Creek, with the purple ranges of the Siskiyou piled around them in endless array. Tired and fagged, they sank exhausted on the cool grass, by the creek's brink.

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After a rest, they began work making camp for the night. Jude unstrapped the packs and got out the grub, while Hoxie built a fire and prepared an appetizing supper of fried bacon, flapjacks and steaming coffee. They were at an altitude of five thousand feet, and the sun had no sooner dropped behind the range than an icy breath blew down from the high peaks, bringing a tang of frost and a suggestion of approaching snow.

Soon after the meal was eaten, and the tin dishes washed and laid by, the treasure-hunters rolled up in their blankets, with Hoxie on one side of the camp-fire, Jude on the other. They were not very talkative. In truth, the half-breed was never voluble, and all day, what with the heat and the hard going, he spoke less than a dozen words.

Hoxie did not go at once to sleep, in spite of his dog-tiredness. He lay awake a full hour or longer after the long-drawn breathing that came from beyond the smoldering fire assured him that Jude was asleep. For one thing, he was absorbed

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by the deep and silent mystery of the mountains. And while he lay there, looking up into the velvety darkness, with the stars shining so brilliantly and closely overhead that it seemed he could almost reach up and pluck them, he kept thinking of Kutch—crippled little Kutch down there on the lower trail. Yes, he was thinking of something else. An uneasy sense of foreboding, coupled with a lurking suspicion, had come into his mind. He had been thinking about those cayuses—or about the mysterious “sickness” that struck them so unexpectedly—

Just then Jude groaned in his sleep and turned over. A wood-owl hooted from a mountain hemlock. Away off across the canyon a timber-wolf howled and wailed in a mournful key. Before Hoxie knew it he fell asleep.

Late in the night he awoke. He was not aware of the least disturbance, yet he found himself sitting on his blanket, his eyes wide open and staring. He was at a loss to know the cause of his sudden waking. The fire had died to a bed of

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glowing coals, and on the farther border of the dull-glowing circle he saw Jude Kiger. The other youth was also sitting up. This of itself was not so surprising, for he, too, might have been aroused by the same mysterious sound that woke Hoxie.

But after a brief glance the young deputy observed that the young half-breed had a rifle drawn across his knees—the one rifle they had brought with them. And this rifle belonged to Hoxie. When Hoxie went to sleep, that rifle lay close to his hand, at the edge of his blankets.

“What’s wrong?” Hoxie asked bluntly. “What are you doing with my rifle?”

The dark-skinned youth did not reply at once. The young deputy caught the wicked glow of those jet-black eyes. “I thought I heard somethin’ prowlin’ round,” Jude finally answered, shifting his gaze into the darkness. “It may be a cougar—I don’t know—an’—”

“Let me have the gun,” Hoxie demanded. “If there’s any shooting to be

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done, I'll do it. Why didn't you wake me?"

"I didn't like to bother you," Jude said, handing the rifle across.

Though he sat and listened intently for several minutes, Hoxie could hear no disturbing sound. He got up and stalked around the camp. Still he could hear or see nothing to cause alarm. When he returned to his blanket he found Jude sitting up, and he had been conscious all the while that the half-breed's eyes were following him. Somehow, the young deputy's sense of uneasiness grew—and likewise increased that lurking suspicion. He sat on the edge of his blanket till he was sure Jude was again asleep. And now, when he rolled up in his own, he kept a hand on his rifle.

They were up early that morning, and ate breakfast in silence. The sun had barely touched the frost-nipped leaves of the mountain-laurels when the two were on their way up Thompson Creek. There was now no sign of a trail, and in time the creek, having been followed to its

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fountainhead under the high bluffs, petered out. Nothing remained but a dry gulch bottom. The treasure-hunters followed this, climbing up, up toward the summit of the divide.

The only halts they made were to rest, and for Hoxie to consult the inner lining of the buckskin coat. On the first part of the journey the young deputy kept the coat on his back, but now he carried it as a part of the pack. The night before, he slept with it under his pillow, guarding it even more jealously than he guarded his rifle. Hoxie's aim was to connect this wild, untrammeled region with the mysterious country shown by the faded chart. And something told him that this was proving true. Anyhow, he knew this to be the same region into which he had come with his father over two years before.

As they climbed nearer the high divide of the range, the heavy timber disappeared. Even the hemlocks were gnarled and stunted, the cinnamon brush twisted, and the chaparral densely matted. The

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youths tramped across long stretches of broken slate and loose shale. Surmounting a steep slope of this, which proved the hardest going of the trip, they came out on a wide bench near the summit of the range. This bench was scooped and hollowed like an abandoned quarry.

Again Hoxie consulted the buckskin chart. This time a pleased smile lighted his bronzed face.

"Are we close to it—close to the old diggin's?" Jude wanted to know.

"We're getting closer—every little while," Hoxie answered, replacing the old coat in the pack and moving on. He climbed to the rim of the hollowed-out bench to make a careful survey of the place. Though cinnamon and chaparral covered the ground with a matted growth, it was evident that this bench, in other days, had been mining diggings. A knoll lifted at one end, and at the base of this was a clump of green laurels—certain indications of water near by.

As Hoxie looked carefully around, taking in the details of the remote district,

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his eye caught certain landmarks that seemed familiar. It dawned upon him that he had been on this old bench before—with his father—and though he had entered it from another direction, he was certain that in here, somewhere, he found the hidden spring.

Again he consulted the buckskin map. He studied it long and carefully. Twice Jude asked bluntly: "Are we gettin' close to the old diggin's?" But each time the young deputy answered by a slight nod.

"We're within a short half-mile of the Siskiyou backbone," Hoxie remarked as much to himself as to his companion. "Down there, at the base of the slope, is the Klamath River. The Cheto is much farther north; but Thompson Creek and the old diggings must be up here—"

"If this is the old diggin's, where is the spring, an' the reservoir?" brought in Jude.

"Keep your boots on!" advised Hoxie, in a tone of impatience. "It will take awhile to work this puzzle."

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They climbed higher up the steep bank, and slid down the opposite side into a shallow basin. Down in here the laurels grew thicker, and the brush was so dense they had to thresh their way through. They halted midway of the thicket, and to their listening ears came the tinkle of trickling water.

“There’s a spring in here!” Jude exclaimed.

Without comment, Hoxie started forward. With the pack still on his back, and the rifle in his hands, he found the going slow and tedious. Yet he threaded and threshed through the tangle, till he came upon a spring that bubbled out of the mossy rocks in the center of the basin. Here the two dropped flat on their stomachs to drink of the cold, refreshing water.

After drinking his fill, Hoxie lay on his back, looking around. He was certain this could be none other than the same spring from which he and his father drank over two years before. But where was that old stone wall—or the remains



"The old reservoir!" shouted Jude. "Now find the gold"

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of the crumbling old wall—he had seen then?

He began cutting away the growth with his knife, for the tangle was so dense as to prevent anything being seen from a greater distance than a few feet. After a time he found a pile of stones, which, though broken and tumbled, appeared to have once been lain in regular order, like a wall. Further search revealed the decayed hinge and flange-slot of an ancient flume-gate. Then he knew for a certainty that this was the inside of an old reservoir—the old reservoir that had, in the days of long ago, supplied water for the diggings of the bench below.

“What are you pokin’ around in here for?” questioned Jude.

“Do you see these stones—all shaped and cut to a uniform size?” returned Hoxie. “And do you see that old hinge and flange-slot of a broken flume-gate? Well, this held water once upon a time, and—”

“It’s the old reservoir! Sure, it’s the old reservoir!” shouted Jude, struck

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with the same peculiar and sudden burst of excitement with which he had entered the treasure quest. "An' now to find the gold! Now to find the gold!"

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CHAPTER THREE.

THEY scrambled out of the basin, with its tangle of growth, and climbed to the high rim above the old diggings. Here Hoxie again consulted the buckskin chart, and made another reconnoiter. With the reservoir located, there remained to be found the site of the miner's cabin. Of course, nothing would be left of the cabin now. In truth, it and all other log structures on the claim had been burned by the Indians at the time of their savage attack. Yet, according to the story of the one who fashioned the buckskin chart, there was a big hemlock near the cabin—and under this hemlock the gold had been buried.

Where was the lone hemlock?

From this high point the treasure-hunters had an unbroken view of a wide sweep of rugged country above and below

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them. Above were only high, barren crags, devoid of vegetation. Below, spread steep slopes, rocky backbones, barren gulches. Such growth as they could see consisted only of small digger pines, brush and low growth. Not a tree of any size was to be seen within several miles of the old diggings.

Hoxie knew that it was the custom of miners to group their cabins, and oft-times such groups were located a long distance from the diggings. Thus it was possible that this particular lone hemlock, though indicated on the faded chart to have had a place not more than a half-mile below the reservoir, might have been a much greater distance down the mountain-side.

“That lone tree should stand right over there,” Hoxie said, indicating a spot of high ground a half-mile or more below the diggings and near the rim of a deep gulch. Yet the spot he pointed to was barren of growth of any kind.

Jude Kiger shook his head while he made a keen survey of the region. “There

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ain't a tree within five miles o' here," he remarked. "I'm afraid that old map has things twisted a bit. Or we're on a blind trail."

"It has been a long time since these diggings were worked," Hoxie commented. "This whole landscape, because of slides and the action of the elements, could have undergone a complete change in all these years." The youth was not going to lose his heart this early in the game. He had not made the long quest to the high divide of the Siskiyou with the expectation of uncovering the lost treasure within a few short hours. As he had already told Jude, it would require awhile to work out the puzzle. Determined as to the course he would pursue, he led the way down the slope toward the spot he indicated from the ridge.

After an extended search he found what appeared to be a valuable clue. This was another pile of stones—not shaped and cut to uniform size, as were those found in the old reservoir, but a heap of jagged, broken, sharp-cornered

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lava rocks. Some of them were red as bricks, others were black.

“These stones came out of a fireplace,” declared Hoxie. “The cabin stood here—or very near here—”

“But where is the hemlock—the big tree with the gold under it?” brought in Jude.

“Keep your boots on!” advised Hoxie once again, annoyed by the half-breed’s impatience and evident desire to jump at conclusions. A short distance from the pile of burnt stones, he came upon something that gave the young deputy cause for uneasy speculation. This was an excavation some six feet across and four feet deep. It was not more than ten yards from the precipitous bank of the canyon.

When Hoxie Morris looked down into that barren hole, his heart sank. It was a full minute or longer before he spoke a word. Jude was good enough to ask no questions. Yet the half-breed, looking intently at Hoxie, guessed at once that something was wrong.

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For the first time since early morning, the young deputy unshouldered his pack. Laying the heavy burden on the ground, he dropped down into the hole.

Some one, perhaps years before, had made this excavation. Such was the disheartening conclusion that came to Hoxie Morris. And that some one had taken away the gold. The big hole, in a dumb, silent manner, seemed plainly to confirm this.

The youth took the pick and began making a few desultory strikes into the pit's bottom.

"Do you expect to find any gold in this hole?" queried Jude.

Hoxie didn't answer. He scarcely had the heart to stand, much less to talk.

"My guess is that the stuff was taken out a long while ago," remarked the half-breed. "An' this was the hole they left. We might as well quit."

Yet the young deputy did not completely despair. He sat on the edge of the pit, and, with his face resting on his hands, his elbows on his knees, did some

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hard, silent thinking. During the few minutes he was down in the hole he took note of certain things that caused him to wonder. And the big question still to be answered was: "What has become of the big hemlock?"

After a time he let himself down into the hole again. This excavation did not altogether appear to have been opened by human hands. There was no ridge of settled earth around the rim, as there would be had so much dirt and broken shale been thrown from it. Nor were there any indications that a shovel or a pick had ever been thrust into the ground in or around the hole. By looking close, Hoxie found the broken ends of dead roots protruding from the earth all around the pit.

Jude Kiger, sitting on the hole's edge, watched every movement of Hoxie. But Hoxie offered no word of comment, nor did he offer any explanation of anything he found. But he caused the half-breed to watch him with increased wonder when the young deputy climbed out and went over to the edge of the cliff, where with

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shaded eyes he looked down into the depths of the gorge.

What Hoxie saw down there caused him to utter a low whistle. A hundred feet directly below, and where the canyon gorge narrowed till its two walls were no more than twenty yards apart, a great tree lay directly across the abyss. The youth knew at a glance that such a tree could never have found rooting on the precipitous walls of the gorge. It must have stood on the upper brink, where a heavy wind blew it over. If it had stood on this side of the chasm as Hoxie believed it did, it had turned over in its descent, as its rooted end was now lodged against the opposite canyon wall.

The half-breed came out to the rim of the gorge. He, too, looked down, and as soon as he spied the big tree lodged far below shouted lustily: "There it is! There's your hemlock! A storm blowed it over! The gold must be in the bottom of that hole!" Without waiting any word of confirmation or command from Hoxie, Jude ran back, seized a shovel and began

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striking with all his might into the bottom of the pit.

But Hoxie had no such course in mind. He casually picked up his own shovel and returned to the rim of the gorge. When Jude, amazed and wondering, came out to see what the young deputy intended doing, he was surprised to discover the latter scrambling down the precipitous canyon wall. Already he was within a short distance of the fallen tree. Jude continued to watch from the cliff's edge.

Arriving safely at the tree, he balanced himself carefully with his pick, and then started out on the trunk that formed a high, precarious bridge across the chasm. Very slowly, a step at a time, he made his way over. As soon as he had reached the other end of the tree, he began striking the pick into the mass of dirt and broken rock that was held by the gnarled and closely matted roots of the old tree. After a few quick strokes he thrust in his hand. Then he turned his face toward the cliff and called to the wondering Jude:

“Bring down the two duffle bags!”

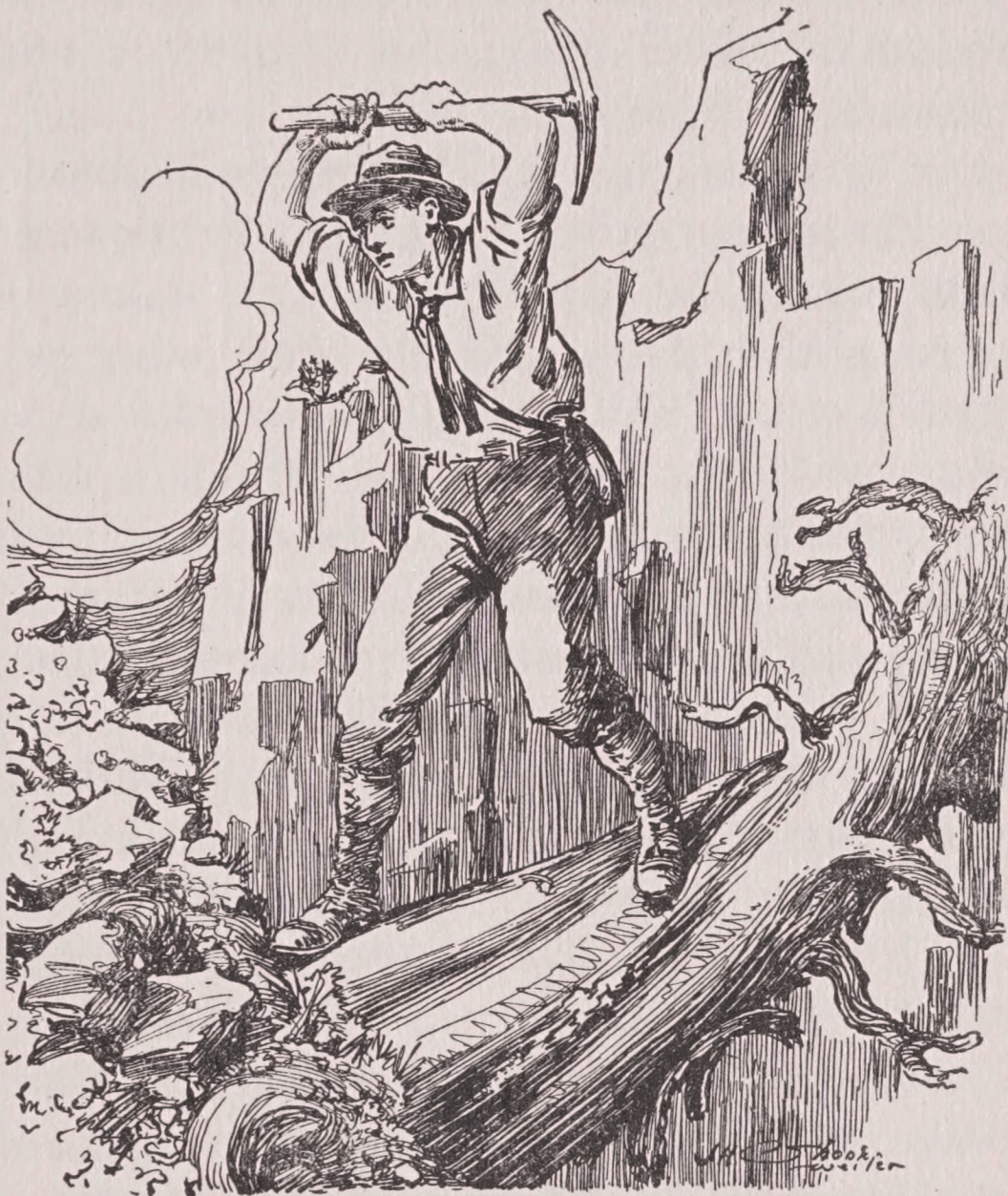
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There was no excitement, no exultation, no tone of joyous discovery or of triumph in the low-spoken command; nothing to indicate that Hoxie's searching, exploring fingers when he thrust his hand into the jagged hole he opened through the mass of roots, had come in contact with a metal that was smooth and cold—that his fingers and his whole body were thrilled by the magic touch of pure gold!

“What do you want with the bags?” questioned Jude. Undoubtedly the half-breed saw no use in making that perilous descent of the bluff without sufficient cause.

“Bring them down!” repeated Hoxie, sternly.

Then Jude brought them down. Not till he reached the fallen tree did he realize what had occurred. Not till then did he know that the long-sought treasure was found. By this time Hoxie had removed several heavy bars of the shining yellow metal and laid them on the tree trunk. Jude, seeing the chunks of pure gold,



He began striking the pick into the mass of dirt and broken rock held by the gnarled and closely matted roots of the old tree

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yelled excitedly: "We've found it! We've found it! The stuff! The stuff!" Then he started across hurriedly.

"Watch your step!" cautioned Hoxie.

There was a full peck of it or more—thirty pounds, if there was an ounce—pure placer gold, in slabs and nuggets, just as they had come from the old diggings. Hoxie removed it all from the roots of the old tree, which so long had held the lost treasure within their gnarled grasp. Then he carefully measured the pile. A third of it he put in one of the bags, and this he gave to Jude. "This is your part," he said. "Kutch and I will divide ours when we meet again."

Jude took his bag, peered into its open mouth for awhile with gloating eyes, then looked up at Hoxie. "Are you sure you made the divvy right?" he questioned.

Hoxie was not pleased with the question—nor with the tone. He had made the division as nearly equitable as possible, and he told Jude so.

"S'pose we shouldn't meet Kutch ag'in. S'pose somethin' should happen—"

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“I’m not indulging in such absurd suppositions,” returned Hoxie, curtly. “Let’s get back up the bluff. It’s far past noon—and we’ve not eaten a bite since early morning. I want to get back down on the trail as quickly as our legs can take us.” As the half-breed seemed in no hurry to start, Hoxie himself led off on the return over the slippery tree trunk. Having no further use for the pick, and with a desire to lighten the returning burden, he left it by the root of the tree. He did not know, till later, that Jude took the sharp-pointed tool in his own hand, and, carrying both the pick and the other treasure-bag, followed close behind him on the tree.

Half-way across, Hoxie became aware that Jude was crowding him—stepping too close to his heels for the safety of both. “Slow up, Jude! Don’t come so fast!” cautioned the young deputy, without risking a backward glance. While he spoke, he felt, rather than saw, the swift, almost silent movement of something above and behind him.

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With quick, almost overwhelming apprehension, came the sense of impending disaster. It was as if all the evil forebodings, the lurking suspicion, the feelings of distrust, were culminating in one sudden blow. Swifter than all, however, was the desire to live, to save himself. He made a swift, forward step, and at the same instant ducked his head.

The movement was none too soon. The pick which Jude Kiger, in the strong grasp of his powerful hand and arm, had raised and swung down, grazed Hoxie's hat brim and missed the young deputy's head by a short three inches. The handle of the tool then glanced from his shoulder, and, jerking from Jude's grasp, fell into the canyon.

The next instant Hoxie felt the iron grip of the half-breed's free hand at his belt. He knew then that Jude, having failed to strike him with the pick, was now desperately determined to hurl him from the tree into the depths of the chasm.

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CHAPTER FOUR.

THERE followed a desperate, dizzy, close-locked combat on the slippery trunk of the tree, high above the rocky floor of the chasm.

Hoxie Morris had two well-defined notions in his mind, while he fought and struggled. One of these was to get himself free from the grasp of the mad half-breed; the other was to hold on to that bag of gold.

He leaned forward, pulling with all his weight and strength to gain the end of the log. He made a few short steps—enough to get him within three yards of the end—then he lost his balance. The grip of Jude's hand was still fastened to his belt, and when Hoxie felt himself going over—falling from the tree—he felt also the swaying movement of the half-breed's body.

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Down, down they dropped. It was well for both that Hoxie, in his attempt to get free, had pulled the two over till they were over the precipitous wall, rather than the deep bottom of the gorge. Even so, they had a long fall before they struck the tangle of undergrowth and brush that covered the canyon slope under the tree.

Even while he fell, Hoxie held tenaciously to the bag of gold. He felt his face and hands strike prickly boughs of chaparral—felt the sharp sting of briars—then a crash—and he lost consciousness.

How long he lay in a crumpled heap he did not know. But when he opened his eyes night shadows were lowering in the gorge. With the first slight movements of his bruised and scratched body there came a thousand shooting pains. In a vague way he realized that his right hand still held to the bag of gold. And his right foot and leg were useless—the ankle twisted and sprained. By a supreme effort he contrived to straighten himself and get a more comfortable position.

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These things, slight as they were, cost infinite pain, and they were accomplished before he had any definite idea of where he was, or of what had happened. Slowly his sense of location came back to him—and then he knew. He raised his head and gazed round him. He knew that one of his eyes was so badly swollen that he could scarcely see through it; knew that it was getting quite dark now within the gorge.

He thought of Kutch—poor, crippled Kutch, whom they had left down on the lower trail. To think of Kutch Cober was to bring a feeling of sympathy to Hoxie's throbbing heart. But his next thought—the thought of Jude—of the treacherous, evil-plotting Jude—brought anger—an overwhelming desire for revenge.

Yet this unhappy desire did not long remain. For out of the darkness, and from near at hand, came a groan—the stifled groan of a human in pain. Then he heard his name spoken, faintly, but distinctly, and with peculiar appeal:

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“Hoxie! Oh, Hoxie!” It was Jude calling him.

“Yes,” Hoxie replied. “I’m here. Where are you? What do you want?”

“I’m just below you,” replied the half-breed. “I’m dyin’ for water. Have you your canteen?”

At the cost of a thousand pains, Hoxie crawled, or dragged, down the steep slope to where Jude lay. Then he unstrapped his canteen, removed the stopper, and gave the dark-skinned youth a drink even before he himself took a drop. Jude fell back with a groan.

“Where’s that pick?” he asked curiously.

“I don’t know,” answered Hoxie. “What do you want with the pick?”

“I want you to kill me with it. You know I tried—”

“Yes, I know what you tried to do,” Hoxie said, “and I suppose I ought to use it the same way on you. But I’m not going to. Anyhow, I need you to help get me out of here. My right ankle is twisted.”

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"I can't help you a step," said Jude. "Both my legs are out o' business. I feel like an elephant had set down on me. I can't even crawl."

"I can crawl," declared Hoxie, "and I'm going to get out of here."

"You don't mean it."

"Yes, I do!" The young deputy spoke determinedly. In truth, he did mean it. During these few moments, in spite of the twisted ankle and the long, uncertain distance to the nearest trail, Hoxie considered the situation seriously. If they remained here in the chasm, they would certainly die. If they lived, they must get out. Hoxie knew the only way he could get out was to crawl, and the long night, and the next day, and another day, and another night, perhaps a longer time, lay ahead.

"Come on," urged Hoxie, dragging forward and pulling the bag of gold, "I'm going." He waited a moment.

He heard a movement in the darkness—then a muttered groan. "It's no use," exclaimed the half-breed, in despair.

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“I’m done for. You go ahead—if you can. This is a soft bed here—good enough, anyhow, for one like me. So I’ll stay—till—well, to the finish!”

“Well, I must go,” said Hoxie. “Do you want another drink?”

“Sure!”

The young deputy turned round the canteen. Jude drank deeply, and when he was done he reached in the dark and found Hoxie’s hand. “Say, old man,” he begged piteously, “before you go, I want to—say somethin’—or ask if you’ll pardon a mean cuss like me—” The half-breed faltered, stammering uncertainly, as if he found difficulty in finding words to speak. “You know, of course, that I tried to kill you. I was greedy. I wanted the whole thing. But now that there’s no chance for me, I want you to take my bag with you, and if you get out, an’ find Kutch—you make a divvy with him—”

“No, Jude—you keep your part—right here,” Hoxie answered. “And as for all the rest, don’t worry. If I get out, I’ll send help to you. Good-by!”

THE BUCKSKIN COAT

“So long—pardner—you’re white—white all the way through!” muttered Jude, fervently.

Then the young deputy, pulling the bag of gold, began dragging his bruised, torn and pain-filled body down the black, rough floor of the gorge. He knew that, by the shortest possible route to the lower trail, it would be a long, long crawl. But the night, with its cooling breath, lay ahead—and there was a chance—always a chance. The blood flowed red in his veins, and the love of life was strong. The last thing that would come to him would be the desire to quit. As long as he had the strength to move he would keep moving—keep moving down the gorge.

The bag of gold was a great burden, yet he would as soon have given up in utter despair as to have left it behind. All through the long hours of the night he crawled and kept crawling. The chaparral thorns, the bramble briars, the sharp shale stones, cut his hands and arms, his cheeks and limbs even more.

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They tore his clothes into strings—but he kept going.

Now and then he felt cool grass under him, and at such places he would lie at ease—yet not long enough to let that dull, tantalizing stupor overcome him. He had no idea of distance, no definite idea of direction. He only knew that if he kept going down the gorge, always down, he must finally reach the lower trail.

There came times during that long night when the weakness of utter exhaustion made him lie for longer and more frequent intervals with his face buried in the cool grass and his hands outstretched. Nothing was sweeter to him than those delicious moments when restful, peaceful sleep seemed so near at hand. Yet he fought them off, and kept crawling.

The time came when he was sure that he must give up—give up to those seasons of stupor whose frequent recurrence was fast driving him into unconsciousness. He did lie once, for so long a time that when he awoke he found himself gazing with blinking, blinded eyes into the daz-

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zling sun. He raised up with a start. And he felt more refreshed, especially after he had emptied the last bit of water from his canteen.

He dragged on again, pulling the bag of gold. The sun rose higher, and the day's heat grew. He became thirsty—and he heard flowing water—water chattering, too loud for a spring. He concluded there must be a stream farther down. He crawled on, eager to find it. Several times he had to halt, groaning, to straighten his injured limb, and to rest his pain-racked body.

Finally he realized that there was green grass under him again—and soft, cool earth. It smelled deliciously. He wanted to bury his face in it. But he wanted water. He was dragging on, sliding down an embankment, when there came to his ears the thumping of hoofs.

He raised his head and listened, his heart throbbing with hope. He could hear the sound plainly—thump! thump! thump!

He tried to cry out, but no sound, or very little, came from his parched lips.

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He listened awhile, and then he tried again to shout. This time he had better success. Almost at once he heard a call: "Who is that?" In spite of his pain, of his dull senses, Hoxie knew that voice, clear, bell-like, musical.

"Here, Kutch—down here by the creek!" Hoxie managed to cry, putting all his remaining strength into the heart-breaking appeal. Then he stretched himself full length on the cool ground. He knew in a vague way that the sound of the thumping hoofs was getting louder—louder. He knew that the voice called again—called his name repeatedly.

When he did feel the touch of a hand on his arm—felt the reviving dash of cold water on his face, and a refreshing draught at his lips—he opened his eyes and looked up into the smiling face of Kutch Cober.

"I'm here, Hoxie, old boy—I'm here!" the cripple assured heartily. "I'll get you aboard one of the cayuses, and we'll have you down the slope in no time. But what's happened? Where's Jude—"

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“We found the gold, Kutch!” Hoxie exclaimed in feverish exultance, as he more tightly grasped the treasure-bag. “I have it here—yours and mine! And Jude—Jude is up in the gorge—with a broken leg! We must send help to him—soon!”

“Very well, Hoxie, very well,” said Kutch; “but you go first. Here, take another pull at this canteen while I bring a cayuse round and rig a pair of lifting-poles. It will be no small job getting you down the trail.”

Indeed, it was no small job for Kutch Cober, the cripple. Yet he, with such help as the injured youth could render, contrived to do it. So that by the time another night came, both Hoxie and Jude lay on cots in the cabin of a homesteader, while a doctor came out from the central camp.

When Jude Kiger, with Hoxie, was fully recovered, and went down the trail of the Siskiyou slope, he left something up there on the high ranges whose loss made him a different youth—made him



Left something up there on the high ranges whose loss made him a
different youth

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more honest, more trustworthy, more a real man. The thing he left was not the buckskin coat alone. Oh, no! Just what it was even Kutch Cober does not know, for Hoxie didn't tell him all that happened on the slippery trunk of that old hemlock in the chasm. But Kutch does know that Jude Kiger, for some mysterious reason, was a far better Jude than he ever was before.

SWITCHBACK JUDE

IT was the custom of the Alpine Club to have its midwinter excursion into the open on some Saturday in January. This year, acting upon the suggestion of Quiff Allison and Sid Matthews, who were the "Committee on Arrangements," the Alpines decided to make the trip up the "Corkscrew Line" to the Bluebottle Quarries.

"We'll have one dandy fine time, and it will be one great big day for us if we go up there," Quiff confidently assured, when he made his report to the other fellows. "Mack Buford, boss of the works, has given us an invitation to come. He declares he will make it an open holiday for all hands. There will be outdoor sports a-plenty, and a grand free feed in the quarry chuck-house. Also, we'll have a free ride up and back on the 'Express,' which in itself will be worth the price."

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“How about it, fellows?” Brick Dorgan, the Alpine president, demanded. The question, however, was a mere formality. Brick knew well enough what the verdict would be. And the verdict was rendered with a whoop.

“The Bluebottle goes!” the Alpines shouted in hearty agreement. “All aboard for the ‘Corkscrew Line’!”

“So be it!” decided Brick. “And now there’s just one other little matter we ought to take care of at this meeting, as we won’t get together again till after the Bluebottle trip. There is an application on file, from a prospective candidate—Jude Ellis—”

“What? Switchback Jude?” interjected a protesting voice in a tone of derision. “Who brought his name in? He’s not in our class at all!”

“Mebbe he isn’t in our class when it comes to style and furbelows,” spoke Tobe Ford; “but old Jude is all there when it comes to being honest and square. I brought his name in because I think he needs our fellowship. All of his working-

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time he is obliged to put in out at the switchback station on the 'Corkscrew.' It's little fun he has. Mack Buford has agreed to let him off Saturday, so he can go up the line with us and share our fun."

To this proposal there was a muttered disapproval. To a number it appeared as if Tobe was attempting to "railroad" the candidate through, which was strictly against the time-honored policy of the Alpines. Also, the atmosphere of exclusiveness, which long had been the pride and the boast of the club, was not exactly suited to such as "Switchback Jude."

To obviate a disagreeable dispute on the eve of the midwinter frolic, Quiff ruled that the application be held over till another meeting, when definite action would be taken. Which suited a great number of the members, but was anything than pleasing to Tobe. As a matter of fact, Tobe had been so confident of getting Jude into the club before Saturday he had told the youth at the switchback station to be ready when the train came by, so he could join the crowd and go on

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to the quarries as one of the Alpines. As chairman of the committee on new members, and knowing as he did the sterling qualities of Jude, Tobe had felt safe in making such promise. Thus he went away from the meeting in a bitter mood. He knew full well how keenly disappointed would be Jude, and no explanation he could make would serve to put matters right.

In fact, Tobe had no opportunity to explain anything, as he did not have the chance to again meet or see Jude till the next day. And the next day was the day of the excursion. At 8:30 in the morning the Alpines, a shouting, yelling, vociferously noisy crowd, assembled at the little junction station and climbed aboard the "Corkscrew Express." This was a string of stubby dump-cars drawn by a snorting little locomotive of the logging-engine style, built for power more than speed. For the "Corkscrew Line," as its name suggested, wound and twisted up and around the steep mountain grades to the Bluebottle Quarries.

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There had been snow during the night, a six-inch depth lying on the lowlands, with a much thicker mantle covering the higher ranges. Earlier in the morning, an extra engine, pushing a snow-plow, has ascended the line, to clear the way for the "express." With a shrill shriek of its whistle, and much shouting from the passengers, the train started. It mattered little to the Alpines that the morning was cold and there was no warmth in the open cars. They kept warm running back and forth and jumping from one car to another. On the steeper grades, where the snorting engine slowed to a walk, the boys amused themselves by leaping off into the soft snow and jumping on again. As the "express" climbed higher, the air grew colder and the snow deeper—the mountain scenery became more wildly grand. Truly, it was good to be out, and alive, on such a day! And the Alpines, for the greater number, were enjoying it to the full.

Tobe Ford was an exception. Tobe's cup of happiness was embittered with the

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thought and the knowledge that they soon would pass one whom he had hoped would share their day's fun. This one waited confidently and hopefully at the switchback station farther up the line. The switchback lay at the base of a steeper grade, and its purpose was to accommodate portions of loaded trains that were cut off and left in order to lighten the load for the remainder of the climb.

On this morning the train would not stop—so Tobe had heard. The locomotive could make the grade with the load it pulled. So the engineer had told the conductor, and the conductor had told Quiff there would be no halt at the switchback, unless the boys desired it. And Quiff, who was looking at Tobe just then, saw the expression of appeal in the latter's eyes. He knew, or he guessed, that Tobe was thinking of "Switchback Jude." If the train did not stop, Jude could not get on—that was certain. Nor would he get on if no invitation were given. "No," Quiff ordered, "we won't stop! Keep 'er going."

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Thus it came to pass that the "Corkscrew Express," with its engine roaring and snorting like a demon, charged through the switchback with all the speed it could muster. There was a youth standing on the snow-piled platform, wearing a bright new mackinaw over his blue flannel shirt. His cap and his mittens, also, were much better than those he usually wore when on regular duty. He gave the engineer a signal as the engine snorted by, but the engineer paid no heed. He looked up hopefully, confidently, at the crowd of youths who filled the cars. But the only response he got was a chorus of yells and cries: "Hello, Jude!" "Switchback Jude!" "Hold 'er down!" "We'll see you later!"

So Jude Ellis, his bright new mackinaw making a spot of checkered red and green on the snow, stood dumbly on the platform and watched the "express" drag its winding length up the grade. He felt his heart sink to the region of his boots. In joyful anticipation he had made himself ready for the day's sport with the Alpine

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fellows at Bluebottle. It was to be his "day off." And he had confidently hoped to have a big time. Tobe Ford had promised it, and Tobe was his friend. Quite plainly, something had gone wrong. The "express" had not stopped for him, as Tobe said it would. And, to Jude's way of thinking, there was but one reason for its failure to halt at the switchback. The Alpine Club didn't want him as one of their members. He was not their class—not their style!

Bitterly disappointed, almost to the point of resentment, Jude strode from the platform and started across the track toward the shanty on the hillslope. A long, lonely day was promised—an unhappy contrast to the day of sport and pleasure for which he had prepared. Jude halted and raised a clenched fist. There was a cold glitter in his gray eyes. "I'm as good as any of that high-toned bunch!" he declared aloud. "For the most part, I don't care! But I did think better of Tobe! I've counted on him as my friend—but now—"

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Jude did not finish what he had in mind. Just then there reached his well-trained ears the shrill call of a locomotive whistle. Jude recognized the call instantly. It was the signal of "down brakes!" It came from the express, which by now had reached the steepest part of the upper grade. After a moment the call sounded again. This was followed by a screeching of brake-shoes as steel bit steel, then a deep-toned, muffled roar that grew louder with each passing second.

"The 'express' has broke in two—and she's runnin' wild!" guessed Jude aloud, as he turned his gaze toward the Bluebottle incline, around whose winding course the train had made its way. "If she's loose—if that string of cars has broken from the engine—the whole works will come tearin' down the grade!"

At that very moment the "express" was "running wild." Anyway, the five rear cars, which carried the shouting, jubilantly yelling passengers, broke from the remainder of the train and started

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back down the grade. The stout little engine could do nothing more than shriek a warning. The two brakemen leaped at once to the hand-brakes and set them down hard. The boys were quick to learn their peril, and changed their joyous shouts to cries of alarm and terror. They, too, set hands to the brakes in a desperate attempt to check the downward flight of the runaway cars. But the track, cleared of its snow, was slippery with ice, and no setting of brakes could serve to check the downward speeding train. On and on, swifter and swifter, hurtling round the curves, threatening every instant to leap from the narrow right-of-way into the depths of the canyon, the broken train rushed.

Jude Ellis, standing in the middle of the track, near the snow-piled platform, heard it coming. The upraised fist had dropped to his side; the cold glitter left his eyes; the bitterness went out of his heart. He thought only of the peril that lay ahead of that downward-speeding string of runaways. Left to themselves,

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with a clear track ahead, and nothing better to check them than the hand-brakes, they would certainly be hurled from the rails and thrown into the gulch, which would mean death for many of the youths on board.

It was Jude's "day off." But not his day off in the matter of duty where helpful service could be done. He turned quickly and struck up the track toward the upper switch. Only the main line had been cleared of its snow. The siding was covered with a depth of from two to three feet. When the lower car in the string of runaways shot into view down the winding grade, Jude had opened the switch for the siding. He jumped to one side, and waited tensely, while the cars came roaring toward him. Shrieking, clattering, the trucks struck the switch, bounded uncertainly—then took the siding! A moment later, and the side-tracked runaways plowed into the deep snow, and, with all brakes set, slid to a halt, while the crowd of excited youths leaped off, some feet first, some head first, all but bury-

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ing themselves in the bank of frozen fleece.

Quiff Allison was one of the first to dig himself out and clamber back up the line toward the siding head. He was at the lower brake when the runaway train struck the switchback—and he knew what Jude had done. “I’m looking for Jude Ellis!” he sputtered, as he dug the snow from his ears. “Where’s Jude?”

“Right over here,” answered Tobe Ford, from the main track. “I’ve already found him.” In truth, a number of the Alpines had gathered round the tall mountain youth who wore the bright new mackinaw.

“We neglected to stop for you, Jude, when we went by awhile ago,” smiled Quiff, “so we’ve come back to get you. It was a mighty good thing you turned the switch, or we would have gone right on by again!”

A hearty laugh, which quickly restored the excited nerves of the crowd, followed this declaration from Quiff. Not one of them but who knew what their leader

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had in mind, and there was a rousing shout of agreement when he said: "The locomotive is coming, Jude. The 'express' will soon make another start toward Bluebottle. Come along, come along!"

CHIEF FIVE CROWS OF THE CAYUSES

THE hated paleface is taking our lands!"

"He is killing our game!"

"He is catching our salmon!"

"He is making our women and children sick till they die!"

"We must rise up like a tornado, and destroy the hated paleface!"

Such were the wailing laments of the medicine-men and the war-cries of the chiefs among the Cayuse and neighboring tribes of the Oregon country near the late forties of the last century. Much earlier in that century the Hudson Bay Company had established a fort and trading-post on the lower Columbia River. The trappers and traders, brought into the wilderness by this company, were venturing far out into hitherto unknown and totally unexplored regions in quest of pelts and

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furs. Rough, hardy men, trained to such work, and versed in the tactful art of approaching savages, the trappers and traders had no great difficulty with the Indians. True enough, some who went forth from the fort never returned.

But the ire of the red men was not fully aroused till the vanguard of the first homesteaders came over the plains and crossed the mountain ranges. These were a different people; for these came not merely to trade for a few pelts and furs; they came to stay—to locate homesteads, build cabins, establish homes. And almost among the first of the settlers were the dauntless missionaries. Jason Lee, Daniel Lee, Cyrus Shepherd, Dr. Parker, Dr. Whitman—these were a few of the brave men who established the first Protestant missions in the far West.

The Cayuses and the Nez Perces were particularly incensed with the work, development and growth of the Whitman mission, established by Dr. Whitman and his company of assistants in 1836. Dr. Whitman and Samuel Parker had come

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West the year before to explore the Oregon country. They were led to believe that missionaries of the Protestant faith would receive a hearty welcome from the Indian tribes. Whitman returned to New York highly enthused, and his story of the Indians and their needs brought a prompt and hearty response. Early the next year his company started westward. In the party were a number of women, the wives of missionaries and prospective settlers. The company traveled with the fur-traders from Missouri to the Western mountains. Up till that time, all travel across the American plains had been by horseback and pack-trains. But the Whitman party took wagons, mainly for the benefit of the women, a few of whom were in feeble health. But in the Rockies the wagons had to be broken up and built into stout two-wheeled carts. Even these—or all but one—were finally abandoned.

The Columbia River region was reached at length, and a mission established. Adobe houses were built, land fenced and plowed, crops sown with grain

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and seed brought from the East, and very favorable harvests garnered in the autumn. Cattle were brought from California, where they were purchased of the Mexicans for \$3 a head, and horses for \$10 each. These were driven over the Siskiyou and the Cascades, with a loss of about one-fourth.

Not only did the mission people and the homesteaders work for the development and establishment of trading-centers and homes, but to help the Indians. The Bible—or portions of the book—were translated and printed in the tribal language that the Indians might read and learn for themselves. A little printing-press, brought by the missionaries, was used to do the printing. The missionaries believed that the quickest way to civilize the Indians was by education, training and helpful service.

In addition to being taught to read portions of Scripture, to worship the "God of the paleface," and to pray, the Indians were shown how to cultivate the soil, plant and harvest crops, raise cattle

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and perform other kinds of civilized labor. Indian orphans were given homes in the mission, and medical service was offered gratuitously by Dr. Whitman and his aids to all sick or ailing savages.

And all might have progressed smoothly but for the chiefs and medicine-men. Fearing they would lose their hold upon their followers, and their glory as leaders, they began to make trouble. Jealousy, envy, selfishness, ignorance—which have been the cause of strife and turmoil and war since the world began—were the disturbing influences with the Cayuses.

Five Crows, chief of the Cayuses, hated the palefaces from the depth of his savage heart. The kindness, the sincerity of purpose, the ideals and improved conditions fostered by the whites were as nothing to him. With Five Crows the power of chief was the main thing. And he feared his power would be lost if the whites remained. His medicine-men agreed with him and so the cry was started:

“We must rise up and destroy the palefaces!”

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But to provoke war there had to be a motive—something to spur on his warriors—something to make the bloodthirst passion.

It happened that many of the Indians who visited the mission were stricken with measles. To the savage this was a strange and dreadful disease. The medicine-men said it was the “curse of the devil brought by the palefaces.” Had Dr. Whitman and his trained helpers been left alone, they would soon have cured most of the stricken Indians, just as they were curing the mission inmates.

But the Indians, heeding the cry of the tribal medicine-men, and following the Indian custom, when stricken with the “curse of the devil” rushed down to the river and plunged into the cold water. And most of them were dragged out dead.

“See! See! It is the curse of the devil!” wailed the medicine-men. “We must kill the palefaces, or we all shall die!”

Day after day the cry was kept up, and night after night, in growing num-

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bers, with swift-increasing hatred, the warriors of Five Crows danced around their fires. But even so, the mission people hoped to quiet the disturbance, and put down the fears of the savages. Calmly, resolutely, Dr. Whitman and his company of workers proceeded with their labor of mercy despite the growing hatred.

Secretly, and unknown to the whites, Five Crows, fearing to make an attack alone, worked up an alliance with other tribes. Runners, swift and silent as the wind, went forth in the night, carrying the message of hate, and planning for the attack. It was the desire of Five Crows, of War Eagle and other of the associated chiefs, to make a united strike upon the mission at an unexpected moment.

True to their cry, the savages, armed and ready, and made fiends by the blood-thirst, rose and came down like a tornado upon the mission. Dr. Whitman and other leaders had been warned by a friendly savage—but too late. The whites had no chance to escape—no opportunity to get help from distant forts.

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On November 29 the red men swarmed upon the mission, broke through the gates, and, though the whites fought heroically, the multitude of savages made resistance futile. Dr. Whitman, Mrs. Whitman and seven others of the mission company were barbarously slain. The whites fought on, hand to hand, and five more were killed before the carnage ended. The savages could have slain every person in the mission, but this was not the plan of Five Crows and the fighting chiefs. They wanted ransom. So about fifty women and children were taken captives and held as hostages, the chiefs sending forth word to the nearest forts that the captives would not be liberated till assurance was given that no Indian would be harmed because of the massacre, and that the palefaces would abandon the Oregon country.

In a few days, news of the attack and the murdering of the whites having reached the distant settlements, a great "powwow" was held at Fort Walla Walla between the fort officers and the represen-

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tative emissaries from the tribes. Bitterly incensed, the fort soldiers and volunteers would have gone forth at once on a campaign of revenge; but they held themselves in check to save the lives of the captive women and children. The Indians were censured for having allowed the medicine-men and chiefs to promote the massacre, and were assured that stern vengeance would follow. But, to win the freedom of the captives, liberal presents were given them. Nine days later, the half-hundred women and children, haggard, terror-stricken, almost starved, reached the fort.

But this did not end the trouble. True to the warning given by the fort commander, the whites were determined to punish the Cayuses. Five Crows and War Eagle, having gained this apparent triumph so easily, became even more arrogant than before. A complete regiment of volunteers was organized and trained to make war upon the Cayuses and their allies. Colonel Gilliam was placed in command, and, with his regiment divided

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into convenient companies, marched into the Indian country.

Five Crows and War Eagle, with a great host of warriors, many of them armed with rifles, took a secure position on the elevated plains near the Umatilla River. The savages still gloated over their destruction of the Whitman mission and the murdering of the whites. Much dancing, feasting and blood-crazed shouting made them feel immune to any danger from the paleface. The medicine-men encouraged this, and it went to such an extreme that the savages believed they were "charmed."

"The white man's gun can not harm us!" shouted the savages.

"The white man's gun can not kill Five Crows!" boasted the warriors.

"War Eagle can swallow all the bullets fired at him!" shrieked the red men.

Possibly this was not the cry that Five Crows wanted to hear. At heart he was a coward. He had not the red courage of other Western chiefs. His main weapon was treachery. Yet he dared not show

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the white feather before his own braves. Nor could War Eagle.

The whites had drawn up in orderly battle array, thrown up entrenchments, and made ready to fight till the last man, if such fighting must be done to quell the bloodthirsty Cayuses.

And when they heard the boasting cries, some of the men, who understood the Cayuse and Nez Perce tongue, called for the "charmed" chiefs to ride out in the open. Five Crows, trembling and fearful now that the time for the real test had come, sat trembling on his horse. He waited, and let War Eagle ride out first. War Eagle, resplendent in his regalia, swept out on the plain, waving his arms in bold challenge. A rifle cracked from the entrenchments in response to the chief's brazen dare.

And War Eagle, with a loud cry that carried with it the note of death, fell in a limp, lifeless heap from his mount.

"Go! Go!! Stop the white man's bullets!" screamed the warriors in a demanding chorus to the hesitating Five

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Crows. And the chief, still trembling and fearful, urged his mount into a swift run. Another gun cracked, and Five Crows yelled with pain; but he held to his racing steed, and, in wild terror, escaped from the plain.

Without a leader, and convinced of the power, the determination and firm purpose of the white soldiers, the Cayuse warriors surrendered. And thus did the Cayuse troubles come to an end.

A MATTER OF HONOR

FOR a longer time than most of the younger boys could remember, a ski race, down the snow-covered slope of Eagle Ridge, had been a regular feature for Cloud Cap's George Washington's birthday celebration. Every year Colonel Allingham, of the Cloud Cap quarries, gave a purse of \$25 to the winner. Early in the month the try-out was held, and the three best runners were named for the main race. This year a new runner appeared—Bud Keezer, a comparative newcomer in the mountain hamlet. Bud had as his competitors in the race, Gus Brady and Dan Willet. Both Gus and Dan had run before, Gus having won the purse of last year; and he had declared, quite boastfully, that he would win it again—even against the newcomer.

By the rules of the race, each contestant was to turn over his skis to Colonel

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Allingham at the quarry office the evening before the event. They were kept in the office overnight, and handed to the runners on the starting-line. Bud was the first of the three to turn in his skis. He tarried awhile at the office door, receiving the well wishes of the quarry boss, and saw the skis laid on the floor by the colonel himself.

Bud had his own reasons for taking the pains to see that his skis were received by Colonel Allingham's own hand. He wanted to be sure they were laid by in good order—and thus feel confident they would come back to him in the same condition for the race. Bud had unintentionally overheard a remark that passed between Gus and a group of the latter's followers the day before, and this remark brought a feeling of suspicion. As for himself, Bud was determined that the race would be fairly run and fairly won.

As he left the colonel's office, he met Gus Brady. Gus had his skis slung over his shoulder. His woolen cap was perched on the back of his head, and altogether

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he wore a cocky air. "Hello, newcomer!" he saluted. "You're all ready to be beat, are you?"

"I'm ready for the race—if that's what you mean," smiled Bud.

"Well, I hope you'll do your best," grinned the confident Gus. "But I can't hope that you'll win."

"If the race goes to the best runner, I'll be satisfied," Bud answered, as he went on into the growing night. The stars were blinking brilliantly by the time he reached home, and the north wind came crisp and keen from the high slopes of Eagle Ridge, giving promise of a fast course on the morrow.

All the people of the mountain hamlet, old and young, wrapped in wool and fur, and many on snowshoes or skis, assembled at the base of the race-course by two o'clock on that afternoon of February 22. Before the boys' ski race, or "championship run," as it was familiarly known, was called, there were individual distance leaps by the men runners of the camp. Some of these older runners, who made marvel-

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ous jumps from the "hump" at the base of Eagle Ridge, had received their training, as boys, in the regular ski-run down the slope.

The arrival of the trio of youthful runners was the signal for much shouting and tossing of caps, with cries of: "Hoor-a-a for Dan Willet!" "Bud is the boy!" "Gus is the winner!"

As with every race that has ever been run, there were boosters and "rooters" for each contestant. Bud Keezer, hearing his own name called by those who wished him well, lifted his cap in happy response. Again he told himself, as he had frequently: "For me it will be a fair race—fairly run, fairly won."

The course of the ski-run was no easy-going straightaway down a barren slope. It was laid out with the purpose of testing the skill as well as the speed of the runners. It led for three miles down the slope of the mountain, following first an upper shoulder of the ridge, then diving into a narrow, crooked gulch, and leading out finally over a plateau or bench, whose

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outer edge dropped precipitately over a high precipice. Unless the ski-runner was an adept, he would find himself, in the course of the run, completely off the designated trail—and thus ruled out.

Colonel Allingham climbed to the crest, as he had done for many years, carrying the skis on his shoulders, and handing each pair to their respective owner at the starting-line. The boys drew lots for positions. Bud won a place between his two rivals, and, just before the word to start was given, he drew his cap lower, buttoned his jacket securely, and looked down to where the crowd formed a broad splotch of variegated coloring on the snow. Bud detected one tiny speck of pea green among the reds, the browns, the yellows and the blues. Above this tiny speck a white muff waved. Bud smiled and waved his hand, for he knew it was his mother, and she, too, was saying, as he had heard her often repeat: "It is a matter of honor, son—don't forget what day this is! I'd rather have you lose the race than to win it unfairly!"

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"Get ready!" spoke the commanding voice of the colonel.

The three runners bent over their skis, their poles poised. Each was alert for the signal.

"Go!" With the one short word, the trio shot down the crooked, snowy slope like three strips of color snatched from a rainbow.

Though the runners could not hear and could not heed, a chorus of shouts floated up the ridge from the crowd below: "Hold your lead, Buddy!" "Pass him, Gus!" "Hurry, Dan!" "Come on, all of you—come on!"

Though a newcomer, Bud Keezer knew every foot of the tortuous course, for he had gone over it repeatedly as a matter of faithful practice. He knew how and when to use his pole—when to hang his weight on his right knee, when on the left—knew every crook and turn, bush and rock, every curve and dip. He had made a clean, swift start, and led off with a good gain. How long he would hold this, or could hold it, he did not know.

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He did know that both his rivals were swift and wary. At the base of the first incline he ventured a backward glance from the tail of his eye. Gus and Dan were running abreast—and not ten yards from the heel of his own skis. Both were straining their utmost to shorten that lead—and neither wanted to bring up the rear. One thing was certain, they must enter the crooked crevice single-file. And Bud, now that he was ahead, told himself determinedly he must enter it first, and emerge first on the lower plateau. But when he bent farther forward, straining every muscle for a swifter pace, he caught a heart-racking sound above the whirring, keen-cutting whistle of the skis. This was a squeak, or groan, like the straining of breaking wood. It caused Bud to straighten himself for an instant. And in that brief moment he had the agonizing sense of the ski-runner who senses disaster—the disaster that must come from a breaking ski. Yet Bud knew his skis were sound. They had withstood every test in practice—and he had handed them

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sound and whole to the colonel the evening before.

“Snap!”

With that sharp report Bud Keezer's heart almost stopped beating. His right ski broke directly under his foot. That foot was seized as if by the grip of a mighty hand. Bud felt as if his right leg would be pulled from his body. Thrown out of balance, his ski-pole went deep into the snow, and the next instant he was hurled headlong, willy-nilly, in the narrow cut. He shouted a cry of alarm and terror. Gus Brady swerved and made an attempt to pass, but caught the toe of his ski in Bud's broken one. Then he, too, thrown out of balance, went sprawling.

Dan Willet, approaching from a wider distance at the rear, sighted the fallen runners in time to make a clean pass, and swung on down the slope.

For a long distance, or through the whole length of the narrow cut, Bud and Gus slid helter-skelter, now head first, now feet first. Neither could check his speed or regain his feet. In a vain effort

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to right himself, or to grasp something more than empty space, Gus, shouting in a voice of terror, locked his arms around Bud's waist. And so, locked together, they slid out of the crevice and out upon the high bench below, while the crowd at the base of the ridge lifted a chorus of alarm and terror.

Bud soon guessed the meaning of that fear-filled cry. He and Gus, unable to make the turn, were sliding, slipping, closer to the brink of the precipice. The glazed snow was like ice, and into this Bud dug the toe of his right foot, and clawed desperately with his mittened hands. Try as he might, he could not halt the downward movement of himself and Gus, while Gus, now struck with an overwhelming realization of destruction, shrieked at the top of his voice. His frantic efforts to check their downward slipping on the crusted snow made doubly difficult Bud's attempts to halt their going. "Be quiet, Gus, be quiet!" he cautioned, "or we'll both go over the bluff!"

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"We are going over! We are going over!" Gus yelled with increased terror. "We are going to die! We are going to die!" He locked his arms in a still tighter embrace about Bud's squirming body.

Glancing ahead, over the sun-glinting slope, Bud saw the dark edge of the bluff's brink drawing closer and closer. He knew well enough that, if they kept going—slipping—sliding as they were now, they would go over—to certain death.

"We're going over! We're going over!" Gus shrieked again. "We're going to die!" He gripped Bud's waist till Bud could scarcely breathe. A moment later he spoke again, but in a lower voice this time, as if both his strength and his hope were gone. "Bud—before we go over," he said in a strange tone, "I want to tell you—to tell you—"

"To tell me what?" Bud demanded, wondering. There was something in the tone of Gus that made him for the instant forget the impending peril of the cliff's brink.

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"I want to tell you it was my fault—your ski breaking—"

"What?" snapped Bud, between gritting teeth. "Your fault? What did you do? Tell me!" In a fit of rage, his fingers sought his rival's throat. Anger drove off his fear and terror.

"Yes, it was my fault," Gus repeated. "I bored your skis—yesterday—before you brought them down to the colonel's—"

"You—you scheming dog!" hissed the irate Bud, as he gripped at the throat of Gus.

"Forgive me—for—give me, Bud—" begged Gus, "for we're going to die—"

Bud's fingers relaxed. Not only the pleading voice of his rival, but another voice, that came with clear, distinct sweetness up the snow-covered slope, seemed to pull at his heart-strings. "Remember, son—it is a matter of honor," he heard that voice repeat—the voice of his mother.

Of honor! That was it! And this was the day of days to remember. Bud, with sudden determination, and a desperate resolve, let go his hold on the throat

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of Gus Brady. His hand reached back till his mittened fingers found the broken, dangling ski. He jerked and pulled, and the piece gave way. Then with all his strength, even while himself and Gus kept sliding, slipping, ever closer to the brink, he jabbed the broken ski into the crusted snow, and its splintered end bit like sharp teeth into the glaze. Failing at first, he jabbed again, then again, and with the third stroke the broken hickory went through the crust—and held!

“Easy, Gus—easy!” he cautioned. “We will hold here—till help comes! Easy—lie easy, and keep your grip on me! The men are coming—from below!”

“But you’ll forgive me, Bud? Say you’ll forgive me!” pleaded Gus.

“Sure—sure!” Bud Keezer responded with the voice and tone of one who knows what it means to make all things “a matter of honor.”

By the order of Colonel Allingham, that ski race, which came so nearly ending in disaster, was run again. And in the next race, which was “fairly run and

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fairly won," Bud Keezer took first place, Dan Allen second, Gus Brady third. Though he was the loser, Gus was satisfied. For Bud, with true-hearted bigness, never let the truth be known as to what caused the trouble in the ice-glazed crevice. And for this he won the everlasting gratitude of his rival.

OLD SPRANGLE PAW

IT was a two days' trip by pack-pony, over a rough mountain trail, from the railroad station to the homestead place where Zeb Walker lived. But the difficulties of the journey through the forest wilderness mattered little with Bob Stevens and Sam Telford. They were "out for bear," as they expressed it, and when you meet Bruin in his native haunts you must leave the beaten track and get out into the wild country.

On the third morning they picked up the mountain youth, and the three went on a half-day's journey farther, making camp in an isolated, primeval section of the Purple Range. They were half a hundred miles or more from the nearest highway—in a region of deep canyons, vast forests of fir and pine, lava crags, and serpentine bluffs. Their camp was in the shadow of Grayback and Preston, whose

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high, cone-shaped peaks of everlasting snows pierced the blue.

That night, while the three youths sat around their fire, Zeb made his first prophecy of what lay in store. "If it's bear you want," he remarked casually, "then we'd better try 'Old Sprangle Paw' first."

"Who is 'Old Sprangle Paw'?" Bob and Sam queried in a chorus of keen interest.

"If you'd lived in these parts as long as I have, you wouldn't ask such a question," smiled Zeb. "Every rancher and homesteader in the Purple Range country knows 'Old Sprangle Paw.' She's a reg'lar terror of a she-bear, an' a long while ago she was caught in a trap—but got loose with a broken, crooked foot—which accounts for her name. Ever since, she's made things lively in these parts—stealin' goats, carryin' off pigs, an' doin' all sorts o' devilment in season and out o' season."

"Why hasn't some hunter or rancher put an end to her mischief?" Bob wanted to know.

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“Yes, why hain’t they?” repeated the mountain youth, with a laugh. “Good enough reason. Old Sprangle Paw doesn’t stand round for hunters to take potshots at. She must carry several pounds o’ lead in her make-up, for she’s certainly been used a-plenty as a target. Must be she has a charmed life—anyhow, she still lives, moves and has her bein’—and that means she is at her old business, reg’lar, of makin’ trouble. Just two nights ago she got two young goats from our flock.”

“Then, we should get her! Sure we should!” declared Sam, positively. “What sort is she, Zeb—cinnamon, brown or black?”

“Neither,” answered Zeb, knowingly. “She has the dark coat of a silver-tip, with a white-tipped nose, but I’m inclined to think she is part grizzly. Anyhow, she’s some terror of a bear when she is cornered as she has been a few times.”

Zeb added other details, calculated, no doubt, to put a quaking fear into the hearts of his friends from the settlements. But the more he elaborated about the

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depredations of the notorious she-bear, the more keenly anxious were Bob and Sam to meet her.

"I wouldn't advise you to be overly rash in your advances with Old Sprangle Paw," cautioned the mountain youth. "I've never been particular' fond of cultivatin' her acquaintance."

"Well, I'd like to get a straight crack at her with my .30-30," declared Sam.

"And me, too, with my .25," brought in Bob.

"You both may have a chance to try your guns," smiled Zeb.

The Purple Range country was an open book to Zeb Walker, and few were the trails he had not followed. He knew every feeding-ground of big game, whether of deer or bear; knew every gulch, every stream, every bluff and ridge. So, early on the following morning, after the pack-ponies had been carefully hobbled, that they might graze on the short mountain grass with no danger of wandering, the three set out for the day's hunt. Though late summer, the air was deliciously cool

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and spiced with the fragrant tang of balsam. They followed a dim trail that led by a winding course to the floor of the gulch. In a little, green vale, close under a high bluff, they came upon a line of tracks, freshly made in the soft, moist earth. Zeb dropped to his knees, and examined the prints critically. "Bear tracks!" he announced at once.

"Must have been a whole drove of 'em," guessed Sam, whose less experienced eye was following the line of marks.

"Yes, there were three—two average size, cinnamons, probably, that went on down the canyon. The other one—see—it's a whopper—with a funny crook to the fore-paw print—"

"Sprangle Paw!" exclaimed Sam and Bob.

"You've guessed it," smiled the mountain youth. "But she didn't stay with the other two. She ain't much for company. Just which way she went I can't guess, for the tracks fade off out here near the bluff. But I'm sure the

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other two are on down the canyon, feedin' on thimble-berries. Come on, we'll try them first."

They were a bit disappointed that they were not to trail the notorious she-bear at once, but spoke no protest when Zeb led on down the gulch. The lower portion of the vale was grown to a dense thicket of cinnamon, buck-brush and wild berry-bushes. Through this the three proceeded cautiously, slowly and as quietly as if stalking a deer.

"Bear are mighty keen on the scent," the mountain youth explained. "An' they'll run just as quick as a deer." Which was not at all the way Bob and Sam had believed. They had expected an open, heroic encounter with the wild brutes. Thus this painstaking, tedious and arduous sneaking, mostly on hands and knees, through the tangle, was not the sort of sport they had counted on.

Finally they drew to a halt behind a long, low boulder. The vale floor was more open here, and for this reason Zeb had urged greater caution. Evidently he

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believed they were in close proximity to the game, as he had not spoken a word for the past half-hour. When they had lain awhile, Zeb raised his head and peered over, directing his gaze to the patch of thimble-berry bushes twenty-five yards beyond. He ducked down again, and, turning, said in a subdued whisper: "Two of 'em!" Then he cautiously poked the long barrel of his rifle over the boulder-top, motioning for Bob and Sam to do likewise. "You boys pick the right one," he directed; "I'll take the other—and count. Wait till I say 'three,' before you pull trigger."

When Bob and Sam peered over, they saw a pair of things greedily working among the thimble-berry bushes. They could almost have believed it was a pair of hungry hogs. But, while they looked, the two forms took the shape of black bears, upreared and sniffing suspiciously.

"Aim!" whispered Zeb. "They've winded us."

Before Sam and Bob got sight, Zeb began to count, and then—

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“Woof!” Snorting fearfully, the two bears, struck with sudden terror, went crashing through the growth.

“Bang! Bang!” went the rifles of Bob and Sam, for neither waited Zeb’s full count. The mountain youth’s big gun boomed an instant later. But the fleeing bears crashed on, pell-mell, through the thicket. The three guns spoke again—and a third time. Then Zeb leaped over the boulder, his companions following. A half-mile they ran, stumbling through the thicket and over the rough, uneven ground, till finally, all out of breath, they came to a halt at the foot of a high bluff. Here, blood splotches on a manzanita bush affirmed their hope that one or both of the bears had been hit. Getting a line on the trail, they scrambled on, and, after another quarter-mile run, found one of the black forms lying in a curled-up heap by a log, over which it had vainly tried to climb.

Neither Bob nor Sam could be sure which one of the two had been slain. Zeb stooped and examined it hurriedly. “It’s

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your'n," he announced, smiling. "Mine got away. You made a good shot—for both of you must have hit, as there are two bullet marks." With the big-heartedness of his kind, the mountain youth was as much pleased as if he himself had made the lucky shot. Bob and Sam were too much excited, too keenly elated, for speech. All they could do was stoop and comb their fingers through the long, soft fur, repeating over and over: "Isn't it a dandy! Won't it make a great rug!"

"It sure is a dandy!" Zeb agreed. "The next thing is to get it down to camp. We'll have bear meat enough here to last a month—"

"Without Sprangle Paw," brought in Sam.

"You're right," agreed Zeb, as he began work with his long-bladed hunting-knife. When the game had been drawn and hung up to cool, the mountain youth proposed that they continue their quest farther, picking up the slain bear on their return. "Nothing will bother it here till

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we get back," he declared with all confidence.

They found a line of tracks leading up a sheer bluff, and followed these till they dimmed out near the summit. As they clambered round the ridge to make a survey of the canyon floor from the rim of the cliff, they were startled by the crashing of growth on a shelf below. A shout of surprise came from all three when they discovered a huge she-bear directly beneath them. A small cub squalled at her feet, while she soundly spanked it, her evident intent being to make it seek cover. Another cub, more recalcitrant, clambered up the steep bluff wall.

"Old Sprangle Paw!" Zeb ejaculated. "Look out for her! She'll be a terror with those youngsters in her charge!"

Oddly enough, neither Bob nor Sam were thinking just then about the notorious she-bear. Both had their eyes on that cub which seemed bent on climbing up the bluff directly into their hands. Sam reached over for it, calling to it as if it were a kitten.

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“You’d better be careful!” Zeb warned. He leveled his rifle as if to fire, but Old Sprangle Paw, more wary than ferocious, seized the cub and quickly disappeared among the rocks. Nor did she come out again, even after Sam and Bob made a captive of the cub, putting it, squalling and kicking, into Sam’s hunting-bag.

“We’ll take it down to camp!” declared Sam.

“Yes—and home, later!” added Bob. “It will make a great pet. What say you, Zeb?”

Zeb shook his head soberly. “I’d leave that little critter right here, if it was me doin’ it,” he remarked.

“Aw—what’s the harm?” Bob demanded. “Old Sprangle Paw doesn’t want it very badly, or she would have taken better care of it.”

“She may want it a lot worse than she pretends,” warned Zeb. Which was all he would say. And the other two, exultant with the day’s luck, carried the cub with them. All three had a big job

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getting the slain bear to camp, having to rig a pole and slinging the game between them, two carrying at a time. All the way down the trail the cub squalled. And it kept squalling till after dark, Bob having tied it securely to a small laurel-tree near the camp-fire. They tried to feed it, but the little captive refused every morsel offered.

“Pore little fellow,” Zeb spoke sympathetically; “he wants nothin’ but his mammy. An’ if I’m not mistaken—” Zeb didn’t finish what he had in mind. He shook his head again, and sauntered out into the void of darkness that had settled round the camp. After a cautious look, this way and that, he came back, saying nothing. Blankets were spread, and the three, having eaten a hearty meal of bear steak and flapjacks, and all dead tired, turned in, or rolled up, for the night. They might have gone at once to sleep, only for that squalling cub. The little captive whined and wailed till it was literally emptied of its last pitiful note. Then, exhausted, it curled up and

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fell into silence. Almost at once, the boys were asleep.

Late in the night, Bob and Sam were aroused by these whines again. Also, they could hear the ponies snorting and stamping, as if in terror. They raised up, and peered around blinkingly. The fire had died to a bed of glowing coals, and in its light they could see Zeb. He was sitting on his blankets, with the long-barreled rifle across his knees. The mountain youth's gaze was fixed on the farther edge of the circle of light. In a moment, a great black shape loomed out of the darkness, and came within the circle of light made by the camp-fire. This black shape quickly took the form of a huge bear.

"Old Sprangle Paw!" Zeb exclaimed in a low, tense voice, as he brought his rifle into position.

Bob and Sam tossed off their blankets and reached for their rifles. But before they had the weapons in their grasp, Sprangle Paw had lumbered round till she was less than six yards from the

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laurel where the captive cub squalled and jerked at its rope.

Zeb was a greater distance from the bear than either of his companions. Fearing they were in his way, he made no immediate attempt to fire. Sam, much excited, hurriedly raised his gun and pulled the trigger, taking no definite aim. He made a clean miss. But Old Sprangle Paw rose to her hind legs, snarling and furious. With open paw and snapping teeth, she came directly toward Sam. Before he could fire again, she swung a mighty fore paw and struck the weapon from his grasp, sending it flying into the dark. Both Sam and Bob then leaped back across the fire, certain that the enraged she-bear would follow. Zeb got to his feet, and jumped round to get range.

But Old Sprangle Paw had other things in mind than that of creating trouble in the camp. She wanted that squalling cub. She lumbered back to the tree, snapped the small rope as easily as if it were but a cotton thread, and seized her little one by the scruff of the neck. Zeb might

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have fired—but he didn't. He held his rifle leveled till the huge black form merged with the intenser blackness of the night. Then he turned round and kicked a strip of pitch bark on the fire, with the remark: "I'm sort o' glad she got her cub. Mebbe she'll take better care of the little critter now."

There was something in Zeb's tone that brought a deeper understanding to the hearts of Bob and Sam. Anyhow, they had one bear—and they were satisfied.



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